GameOn

RISEN 3
TITAN LORDS
ENHANCED EDITION

F1 2015
Formula 1

gamescom

METAL GEAR SOLID V
THE PHANTOM PAIN
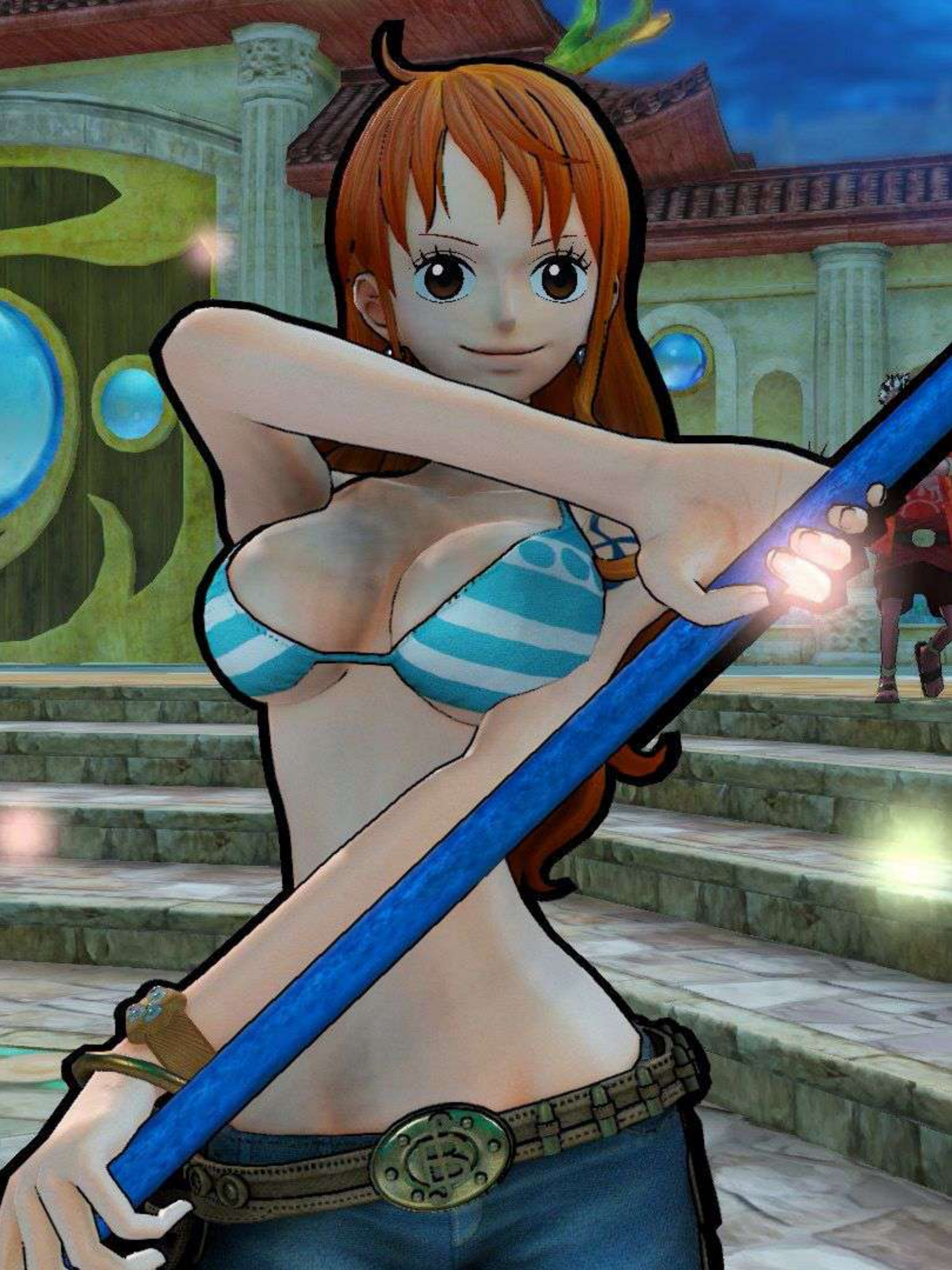TACTICAL ESPIONAGE OPERATIONS

PES 2016
PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER

THE CREW
Wild Run!

W2K16

EA SPORTS FIFA 16

INSIDE
28 PREVIEWS
14 REVIEWS
& 8 ARTICLES

Welcome

Welcome to issue #72 of the GameOn Magazine! We finally have those gamescom previews we promised in the last issue, which really do make up most of our content this month with 25 of them!

Amongst them (because who wants to type all those game titles out!) are Armikrog and Action Henk from Luke, WWE 2K16 and Heavy Gear Assault from Dom, Ryan got a look at Master of Orion, Stellaris and Gremlins Inc., Reece saw Battleborn and Mafia III, and Ruth took a look at LEGO Marvel's Avengers. We also have previews for Mad Max and Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain, but the reviews will be in the next issue.

We have a couple of other previews too, with the swinger Energy Hook and grand strategy MMO Total War: Arena both in Early Access on Steam, written by myself and Ryan respectively.

Our 15 up-to-date reviews include F1 2015 from Steven, Matt with The Flock, Ben got some hacking practice with Hacknet, Matt had No Time To Explain Remastered and Calum killed some teens in Until Dawn.

But first, in our articles section, Socrates had a play around with PES 2016 (to pair up with our preview by Dom), James gives some tips on your Rocket League game and Ryan thinks he's Stalin.

So, with something for all tastes of gaming, go read the rest of the issue! See you next month!

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The Lost Levels of So I Tried...

There have been some So I Tried... that Andrew didn't tell anyone about.

By Andrew Duncan

If you're a regular reader of the segment, you may be wondering - is Andrew actually just playing through his Steam catalogue and writing about everything? Well, the series started out as an excuse to play through the titles in my backlog - if you write about games, you tend to not take the time to play too many of them. But I've not written about every game I've played, so far there are seven games I haven't written about - this is my confession.

I decided to write this as I want to give full disclosure to you, the readers. I was playing what should have been the latest entry of the series and had to stop for family reasons - and it reminded me of how I hadn't finished writing about more than one title I'd started for So I Tried... The opening blurb always states that I will play a game no matter how poorly I do or how badly it sucks - this hasn't always been true.

In one instance, I stopped writing about a game because it didn't have a campaign or story mode - Demigod. Another, I stopped playing because I was bored of it well before the half hour mark - Sid Meier's Railroads.

However, it's not always a conscious decision to give in and not write up a game. I completely forgot to write up Fez, after a fairly pleasant half-hour. A day after the fact and the article is ruined

The Lost Levels of So I Tried...
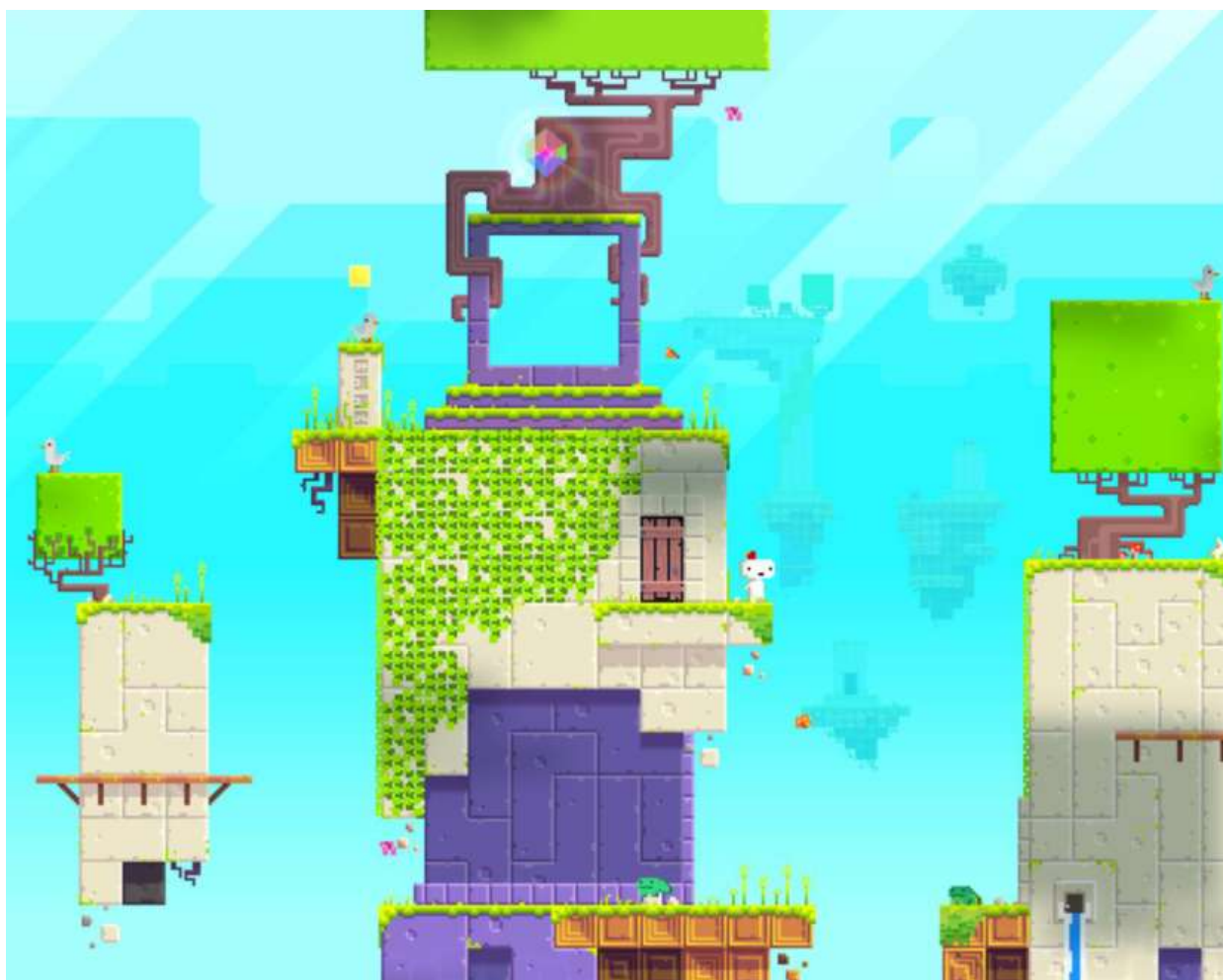
- I always write it up as soon as I finish playing. In the case of The Witcher 2, my computer just can't handle it on the lowest settings.

Ampu-Tea turned out to not have enough in it to write about, and so was abandoned before write-up. Conversely, Two Worlds: Epic Edition has a bit too much to experience in only half an hour's playtime. And X: Beyond the Frontier had such a long cutscene after the tutorial, I didn't experience enough of the game to form an opinion!

So I apologise to all of the titles above, and especially to Pixel Puzzles: Japan - which was to be the latest So I Tried... By way of apology I'll do a brief summary for all seven games.

Which am I still playing?

None of them. Ampu-Tea is hardly the single-player narrative masterpiece I look for, Demigod's the same but with less of a Let's Play angle. Pixel Puzzles: Japan is slow and boring (just like a physical jigsaw puzzle), more so than Sid Meier's Railroads which was far too involved - but I
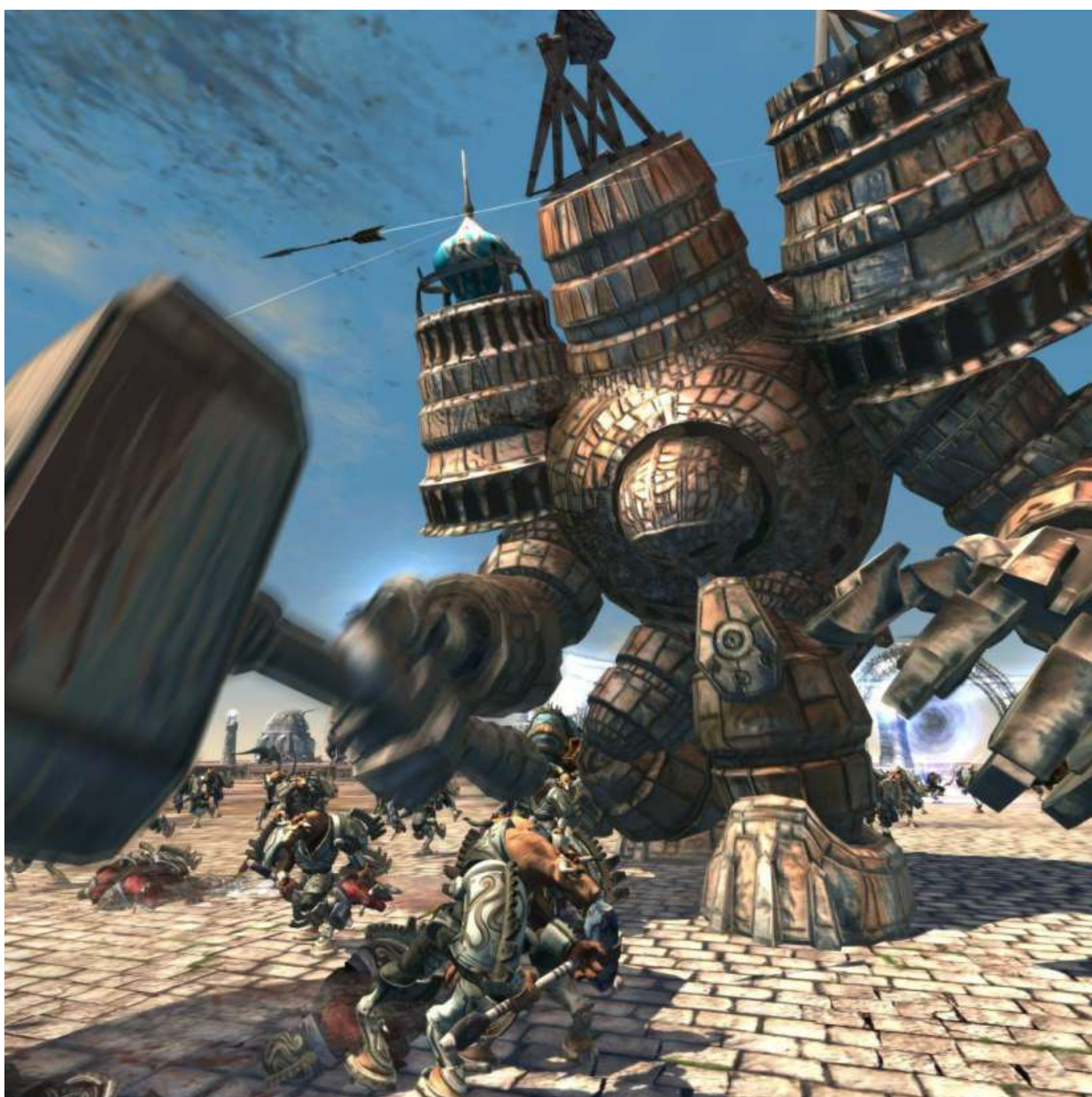
really should have expected from a Sid Meier's title. Fez, Two Worlds and X were actually enjoyable enough, but they aren't installed anymore. I intend on going back to Two Worlds at some point, and I might just skip ahead to X2 when I return to that series. Fez, however, wasn't something I could see myself playing a whole lot of, so it came off.

So what now?
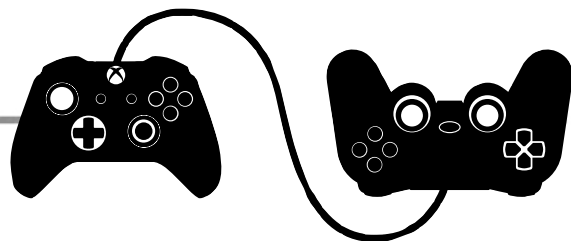
I'll carry on writing up games as normal. If people appreciate this little confession, I'll keep

a better log of what I play but don't write as an article, then every five or so I'll write up another Lost Level. What's more, I've started to work on some video editions of So I Tried... - with a retro spin. By the time you read this, the first one should be live and you can find it here. Instead of a half hour play, I'll play them for fifteen minutes and record it, then speed it up to about five minutes and talk over that - but we'll see how it goes. Your feedback is greatly appreciated!■

Ryan is still battling the hordes with the forces of Rome.

By Ryan Davies

Welcome to Holding Back the Hordes, a series of articles following my journey through a new Total War: Attila campaign. At the head of the Eastern Roman Empire, I've made it my task to hold back the 'barbarian' hordes; defending my capital of Constantinople while keeping invaders out of my lands for good - all while pushing my Empire to new found glory.

In the first part of this series, I put in place the building blocks of my new empire with a focus on farming and increased income - although that focus meant I wasn't prepared when disease struck my lands and spread like wildfire. On the bright side, I managed to kick the Visigoths out of Greece and kill off their infamous leader

Alaric, reversing the path of history. This part begins with my empire still suffering from disease, but developing slowly and surely. Plus, with a new enemy attacking from the West, I turn my Third Legion towards Northern Africa to put down the invading Garamantians.

My project for faction-wide sanitation continues. I'm building a large number of

cleansing constructions that should help thwart the disease, although given how well it has now penetrated my lands, I might just have to wait it out. At least my armies have still avoided it. The last couple of turns have been punctuated by me declaring war on a rather silly number of tribes. Of course, I'm not actually attacking them, rather I'm joining a war that the Western Roman Empire have been forced in to. So I'm at war with the Visigoths once again, only around a year after topping off their leader and making peace. I'm also at war with a bunch of Britannic and Frankish tribes like the Picts and Suebians - so that may well come back to bite me.

This turn also saw my biggest problem to date - the destruction of the Third Legion. As it marched into North Africa the Garamantian army it sought turned and struck back. The battle slider was set at about 40:60 to me losing, so I took the reigns thinking I could handle these desert nomads - turns out their cavalry can be rather devastating. It didn't help that my Third Legion was horribly overpopulated with ranged units. Considering the mobility

of these Garamantians, I don't think I'll be needing any more archers against them in the future - just more spearmen! In short, I lost my whole army, only costing them 600 casualties (in a cruel parallel to my victory against Alaric's army). Whelp.

It's all kicking off now. I've started to build a new legion in North Africa, this time better equipped to fight the Garamantians' cavalry-focused army. I'm also making a lot more money now that the old legion is dead (every cloud...), so I've invested that into some useful buildings. Unfortunately, the last few turns have pretty much made me enemy number

one. As well as joining the Western Empire against a few more tribes, the Sassanid Empire has gone and declared war on me, bringing with them a whole bunch of smaller Middle Eastern states that will no doubt descend upon me like madmen. My Second Legion, which has been camped out in Turkey for a while, now has something to do - although I'd much rather they stay out of any fighting, not that I can avoid it now.

398AD Winter - Turn 16

With the Empire now engulfed in true total war, I spend the last few turns shoring up defences and making sure my eastern towns are prepared for the Sassanids and their allies. Of course, there's only so much preparation I can do. Their armies attack me in a few different places, with mixed successes. I manage to hold them off in a couple of battles, but they also raid a couple of towns - surprisingly not taking the settlements, but rather destroying buildings and taking my money. That is, at least, until I bring my Second Legion into the fight. After a couple of successful smaller battles against various Sassanid client states, I take the fight to the empire itself - and instantly regret it.

The Legion is pursued through the Sassanids' lands by no less than four armies! Eventually they trap me and assault my army with three whole forces. I put up a decent fight, and inflicted almost 2000 casualties on their 4000 strong army, but I lose my entire Second Legion in the process. Not good. This destruction of armies isn't something I'm entirely used to, thankfully I've got the economy to quickly rebuild new forces, but taking big casualties so often is going to have a bad effect in the long run. I need to be smarter about where I place my Legions - because at the moment I'm being overrun.

399AD Summer - Turn 18

My Fourth Legion, under Emperor Flavius, has pushed back against the Garamantians.

I've retaken Augila, and now made a peace agreement. I had to pay a little gold, but considering the wave of forces coming from the East, I need as many men in that part of the world as I can get. I've started to build two new Legions, one in Turkey and one near Jerusalem, so hopefully they can turn the tide against the Sassanids and their allies who have really started to raid my lands now. For the first time in the game I've got a food shortage (admittedly, it's only a small one), so my troops are suffering a small amount of attrition. Plus, the Sassanids are besieging my key town of Edessa, which should prove problematic if they take it - a highly likely event at this point.

400AD Autumn - Turn 21

Atilla is born in some far reach of the world. Which means it won't be long until the Huns begin their assault on my lands. My First Legion is still going strong up in the Balkans, so they should be able to resist any probing threats for now. While that's going on, I'm finally making my move against the Eastern factions. The Parthians, including their faction leader, fall at the gates of Aelia Capitolina (which will become Jerusalem), and my new Sixth Legion from that region is starting to make its way into enemy territory with several enemy cities on the horizon. Plus, with my Emperor Flavius and the Fourth Legion making a beeline for the same regions, I should have plenty of strength pushing into the

East soon. Edessa and the surrounding cities are still under constant attack, but so far the factions have held back from actually taking the cities - seemingly happy to just let them slowly burn.

400AD Winter - Turn 24

The tide of the war is turning, but not without some hiccups along the way. Food shortages are continuing to affect my troops, preventing them from replenishing and causing a little attrition. It's difficult to predict whether I will have enough food for each turn, but at the moment I'm balancing on a fine line. More agricultural buildings are on the way though!

Sad to say, that's not my only issue. Slowly degrading public order in a couple of key provinces is finally causing me troubles. Rebellions in both northern Turkey and North Africa have forced me to divert troops to the problem spots, which means my Fourth and First Legions are no longer located where I'd like them to be. Thankfully though, the actual war in the East is going well. Despite finally losing the town of Amida, I've secured two important open-battle victories against the Sassanids, one against the faction leader's army. With those two armies out of commission for a while, I've got a much better chance of holding the forces to the north while pushing into their lands in the south. This is the tipping point now - things could go either way. ∎
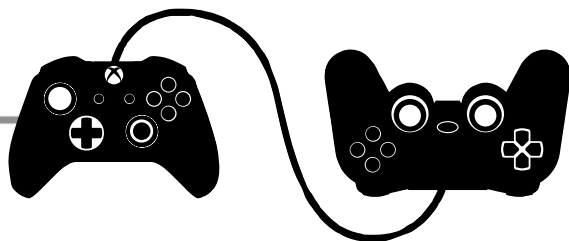
Short Thought: When Should I Get Destiny?
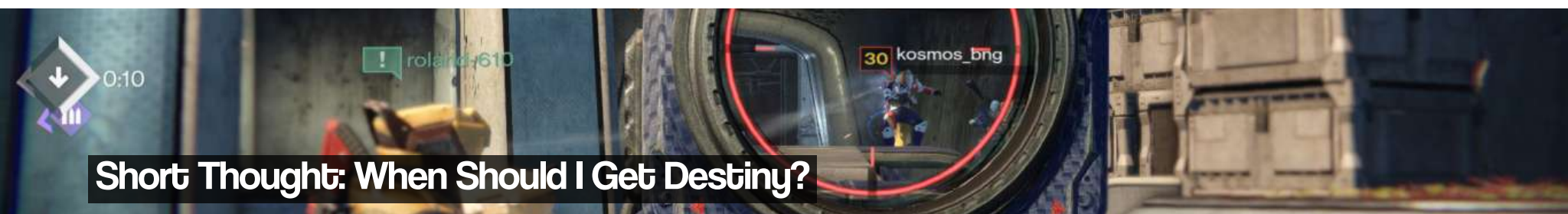
With the expansion arriving, Andrew muses whether or not to finally take the plunge.

By Andrew Duncan

When Destiny was released, it received a lot of criticism for being lacking in story, though we gave it a 9/10 for the rest of it. With the upcoming The Taken King expansion, they are apparently fixing that issue, amongst others that the playerbase has brought to their attention over the past year.

From what I've either read or watched on YouTube, The Taken King is set to basically be Destiny 1.5 - not a sequel, but much more than the base game. This includes having Nolan North (voice of everyone in every game) come in and voice not only the new parts of Ghost's script, but also redo every single line from start to finish. The one reason I was almost a Year-One Adopter

Short Thought: When Should I Get Destiny?

was because Ghost was voiced by Peter Dinklage, and I love his voice. Yes, there were also criticisms about the Dinklebot, but there are also people who don't want a Nolanbot.

So, more story, and Ghost voiced by a more accomplished gaming voice actor, what else? There are changes to the levelling up and crafting systems, which will make those parts less of a chore, or at least less useless. Again, this is according to what I've read or watched, not actual experience.

With all of these changes in mind, why shouldn't I buy a much more finished game, with loads more additional content?

Bungie's 'ten year plan'. They put out word last year that they have plans that could last up to a decade. Why would I buy even this second version of Destiny, when next year there will be a third? Heck, shortly after the "Definitive Destiny" could be Destiny 2, which would result in a Destiny Collection come 2017 - save even more money! Waiting for all three to

be collected for the PS5 would make even more sense, surely...

Or am I overthinking it, and I should just shut up and give Activision some money for the Legendary Edition next month? It's been a while since The Amazing Spider-Man 2 came out...

I'd just like to point out that I have my spell check powered by Google in Google Docs, and it didn't flag Dinklebot. Congratulations, internet. ■
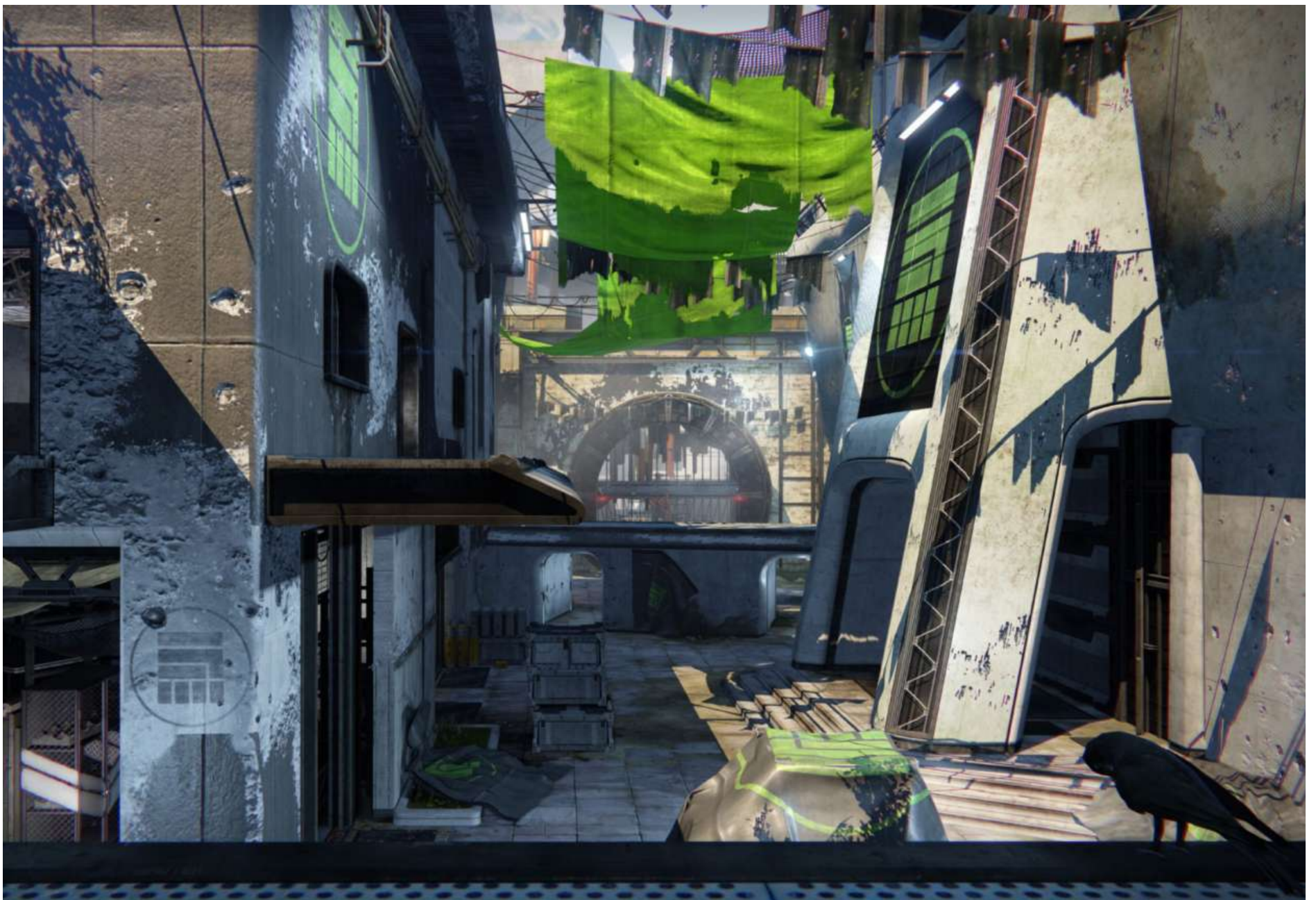
Short Thought: 'Why is Nathan Drake in the Army?' and other voiceover confusions

Voiceovers can be confusing, at least if you're Ryan.

By Ryan Davies

That voice is really familiar," I say to myself during a sceptical play session of Spec Ops: The Line.

"Who is that?"

A quick Google reveals the mystery voice to be none other than Nolan North. "Of course it's Nolan North! It obviously wasn't Troy Baker, so who else could it be?"

So, over the course of the next few hours, I have to adjust to the very strange reality that Nathan Drake's voice is echoing through the arid wastelands of Dubai, under the guise of a Delta Force operator. I know Nate is a bit of a killing machine, but I never expected him to go full-on Rambo.

In fact, you can find Nate's voice in a lot of places: stating the consistently obvious in Assassin's Creed, rolling with the punches in Deadpool, or even just providing a bit of extra chatter in games like Dying Light and The Last of Us. Nolan North's stock voice will, to me at least, always be Nathan Drake. So it's a little jarring to hear his voice on another character; and you know, I love Nolan North and think he's an excellent voice actor, but it does create some problems.

As people who've grown up during the age of celebrity, we're accustomed to seeing the same people fill our screens/pages day in, day out. We're used to distinguishing the difference between young, thoughtless Leonardo DiCaprio in Titanic and crazy, hilarious Leonardo DiCaprio in Django:

'Why is Nathan Drake in the Army?'

Unchained. Well, that's a good example at least. There are definitely a fair few Tom Cruise or George Clooney movies where it's difficult to see any remarkable change at all. Still, we're used to it, and we suspend our disbelief accordingly.

With videogames, this can sometimes be a little more tricky. In theory, of course, that shouldn't really be the case. The visuals are pretty much always different, allowing our eyes to trick our minds (hence having to Google the Spec Ops VO). Yet there's something particularly odd about hearing nothing but an actor's voice. It becomes all too easy to just centre of that voice, until it's the only thing you notice about the character. It's a similar deal with animated movies, too.

It's not like this a true problem. I'm sure we'll all get used to it eventually, but it's an unusual position. More than ever before, certain voice actors are gaining cult celebrity status (in particular the two aforementioned), which means they're unlikely to slow down anytime soon.

So here's to Nathan Drake's next big adventure as a space marine/criminal mastermind/detective/mystical creature.■

Pro Evolution Soccer 2016 Demo Impressions

Pro Evolution Soccer 2016 Demo Impressions

Socrates takes some time to play the demo to prepare for launch.

By Socrates
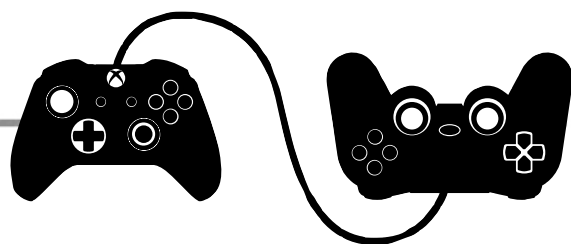
FIFA 16 will outsell PES 2016. In the same way that FIFA 15 outsold PES 2015 and FIFA 14 outsold PES 2014. But the financial ramifications of the sales of both games are best left for the boardroom.

"Is PES 2016 good?" remains the more pertinent question.

Or, rather, is it better than FIFA? It's hard to remember the last time I enjoyed a PES game, or at least it was. PES 2015 was undoubtedly Konami's greatest effort in the series since 2006; back then, Adriano was on the cover. But the game wasn't without its problems. Poor presentation, stiff movement, laughably poor goalkeepers and unbelievably strict referees hindered the experience somewhat.

Another year sees yet another challenge from Pro Evolution Soccer on the seemingly imperious FIFA and, if the demo is anything to go by, it's Konami's best effort yet.

What's immediately noticeable is the fluidity of PES 2016. Passing is a lot sharper, with the act of releasing the ball made much quicker. Players no longer have the ball stuck under their feet, and the slight feeling of sluggishness that plagued PES 2015 is entirely gone. Passing is smoother and more varied, too, and an added array of animations serve only to heighten the sense of realism. The speed

of the game just feels faster, without straying too far into an arcade-y, unrealistic style.

Undoubtedly however, the game's biggest improvement is in its AI. I watched an interview recently with Adam Bhatti, PES European Product Manager, where he said, and I'm paraphrasing slightly, "you'll never have to command the AI to make a run again." He wasn't kidding.

To say the AI are smart in PES 2016 would be a gross understatement. Often in football, passing is dictated by the runner more so than the passer himself. The runner moves into space, the man on the ball spots the run and pings it to him. In PES 2016, players make smart runs like these all the time. My full backs are always looking to get on the overlap; midfielders make driving runs into the box from deep; strikers look to play off of the last shoulder of the defender or run into the channels. The players will be there, it's up to you to find them.

Really, what it all leads to is variety. I've spent several hours with the demo, playing on a range of difficulty levels and with every team, and no two games have felt the same -- no two games have followed the same pattern. I score different goals, I concede different goals and I adapt to the flow of the game. Given the limited choice of teams, it's an impressive feat, one that bodes well when the full game releases this September.

But the demo isn't perfect. Referees have seen a massive improvement, but I still found myself screaming at the keeper on one too many an occasion; a football fan will know what Manuel Neuer should or shouldn't be saving, and when it strays into the latter, it shatters any sense of immersion. The needlessly convoluted and difficult set-piece system still remains too, with dead ball situations as tough to execute as ever.

But, aside from that, PES 2016 is...looking pretty good, actually, although the full game still has some important questions to answer. How will the revamped Master League mode look? What changes have been made to MyClub? Will I still have to suffer Jon Champion's commentary?

EA are yet to release their demo for FIFA 16, but, for the second year running, they have themselves a worthy challenger. ∎

©Konami Digital Entertainment

Ryan feels he may have been playing too many war games.

By Ryan Davies

A single death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic.

That's a quote from Joseph Stalin, in case you didn't know. A slightly ironic statement given the man's bloodied history.

Honestly, it's a surprise he ever considered even a single death to be a tragic occurrence.
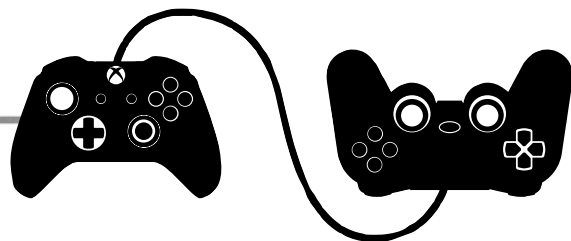
Still. As I sit at my desk, like the fearsome Georgian dictator must have many years ago, I can't help but feel as though my actions are worryingly akin to his. A bit of sneaky murder here, mass prisoner slaughter there, a huge, seemingly unending war.

Of course, the key difference is that while Stalin sat at his desk

you're worried about sending your war-torn infantrymen into combat once again. "Don't worry boys, you won't be fighting Jerry tonight. Go back now, into the ones and zeroes that make up my PC." No, instead we simply click, and click and click again until either the enemy or your own troops are all dead. Whatever the case, there'll be more of both.

It's certainly rare that I'll play a Paradox grand strategy game and actually think about all the men I'm sending into battle over a diplomatic insult. The thousands of dead people really are nothing but a statistic - sometimes good, sometimes bad. If I send 100,000 of my men against 10,000 enemies, then that's good - more of my boys get home! But then, I don't really care about my little digital men reuniting with their families, I just need to keep them alive so I can mercilessly sling them at the enemy once again.

organising and ruling the largest nation on Earth, I'm sitting at my desk playing Total War. Or Crusader Kings. Or Company of Heroes. The game doesn't really matter, the point is: I'm causing millions of virtual deaths, and I don't think Stalin's quote has ever been more relevant.

War strategy games (which probably account for 90% of all strategy games) certainly

have a tendency to give the player a lot of power over very many people. We take that power and, because they're all little virtual people that don't really exist, we barely consider whether we should or shouldn't use them and their strengths like resources to be farmed.

Well, obviously. It would be a little weird to lose a game of Company of Heroes because

So with this mentality certainly ingrained into my gaming psyche, I'm getting a little worried. OK, maybe worried isn't the correct word, I just find it to be a point of interest. All of

a sudden, through the simple assistance of a videogame, I find myself thinking more than a little like a crazed dictator. From my high tower I give the orders to little people that do my bidding. I send them to die, and I don't give a shit. Something like Command & Conquer or Company of Heroes are certainly good examples of this, purely because the troops have no hope of questioning my omniscient orders.

Yet what happens to that illusion of dictatorial control in a game like the aforementioned Total War, when bad management can indeed lead to a French Revolution-esque uprising? Indeed, it's only when your little minions start making angry noises that you really start to listen to them. Or execute them all. That sometimes works. Through these signs of discontent the links between myself and Mr Stalin resurface - suddenly his horrific purges

start to make a lot of sense. So yes, in short, many deaths do feel like a statistic. Even when I zoom into the battlefield in Total War and scan over the piles of dead bodies, it's tricky not to think of them as nothing more than a lost or gained strategic position.

What's even more interesting though, is how videogames fit into the first part of the quote. You might argue that the reason I see those little Roman/

Shogunate/WW2/etc soldiers as a statistic is because that's what they physically are. Just numbers represented in digital visual form. But then, the same applies for John Marston in Red Dead Redemption, The Boss in MGS3 or Joel's daughter in The Last of Us (that one still stings). Really, it's nothing but a perfect demonstration of just how good that quote is. These are characters we care about, have become invested in - or, well, sometimes it's just dramatic enough to cause a little tear.

So no, it's not just because it's a videogame, it's because large scale war has a dark tendency to rip the humanity out of a situation. It's easy enough for me to sit on my high throne/office chair and order about my digital armies, but when you think of just how similar that act is to the real life generals and dictators - it suddenly all becomes a little too real.

Would I be capable of such an act in real life?

I hope not, but I can't help but feel as though videogames have prepared me for it, and that can't be good.■

Roguelikes are Not my Cup of Tea

VodKaVK tells us why he isn't a fan of roguelikes.

By VodKaVK

A few weeks ago I started playing Invisible Inc., only to find it was one of the best games I had played in the past year. As soon as I installed it I sank tons of hours in the first couple of days, many more than I'd like to admit. After two days of shameless antisocial isolation, I managed to reach the end of the game and watch that final cutscene resolve. After many tries, I managed to tailor a pair of agents and give Incognita a set of skills that worked efficiently with each other, but also individually. After more than twelve hours of playing, I knew enough from the game's system to beat a campaign that lasts less than two and a half hours if you do it right off the bat. Then, the game encouraged me to try any of the other higher difficulties available , offering me a test to my skills and many hours more of fun to enjoy. So I took the challenge: I ramped up the difficulty and chose my agents.

I then started feeling something that I had also strangely felt when playing FTL, or Don't Starve: boredom; even though I loved these games. I hesitated about the reason why I was submerging in the litany of completing the game again. I knew how the plot would develop and end, and I never had the feeling that there were parts of the game I was missing, even though I still had a couple of agents to unlock. Did I really care about the challenge and how good I was at this game? Did I really want to get new agents I was not going to use? Did I really want more of the same? It turns out I didn't, and with it I moved onto the next game to review. However, it bugged me for quite a while.

I was able to appreciate the sheer quality in any of these games; why was I bored then?

It all came down to the motivation to keep playing. The term 'gamification' has popped up quite often in conversations about compulsion and motivation, whether it's in Gamasutra blogs or corporations' coaching sessions. In the case of games, it is based around the idea that a player will need additional factors to remain engaged, aside from the basic mechanics. Most of all of these factors are different forms of reward, whether they're achievements, new characters, a score count or new bits of the narrative. As a general rule, they are widely separated in intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Intrinsic motivators are those that root in yourself and your approach, like a desire to beat a score. Sometimes, these motivators are not necessarily gamified. For example, the simple enjoyment of a game's mechanics may be enough of a motivator to have you wasting your life in front of the screen. The extrinsic ones are those that the developers place

ahead of you, with the promise that you'll get there someday. Again, not all of these are artificially implemented aiming at gamification. Sometimes seeing the ending of a game may be motivating enough. In some other cases, like Call of Duty, for example, many spend uncountable hours trying to reach the highest prestige, or unlocking certain weapons or camos. This level progression has generally been enabled so the player can aspire to higher badges, more powerful weapons or tackier camos. Achievements and trophies that don't affect the game in any way, but that are markers of your ability and dedication, are a clear representation of artificial motivators.

Among all these, only the extrinsic ones can be considered gamifying factors. Nevertheless, the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy is rather artificial, as in many of these situations there are both extrinsic and intrinsic factors. The desire to obtain a certain badge may be intrinsic, but the fact that the trophy is there to achieve, offering you a chance to show off your skills in your PSN profile or even test them for yourself, makes it an extrinsic factor. What's more, some people may not care about having trophies at all! Not every reward or motivator works the same way for everybody.

Much of the motivation in each person to play a game comes from how that person approaches games. For example, some may find the character progression a chore, only being interested in picking up as many collectibles as possible. This person would not be interested in levelling up their Pikachu to level 100, but they might find cathing 'em all the epitome of entertainment. This doesn't mean that they won't care about beating the Elite Four; it means that this is not their main motivator in the game.

Roguelikes are Not my Cup of Tea

This is where player types come into action. Different players may find different motivators in different games. Although not enclosed categories, and in many occasions dependent upon the game you're playing, player type usually determine what kind of play and/or game a person will like.

How is all this linked to Invisible Inc.? Well, Invisible Inc. is a roguelike game. Mastering the game, getting to know its intricacies and key aspects, is certainly appealing for me. In roguelikes, you do this through repetition and trial and error. You screw up, you restart the game, and you don't screw up again. The reason why this is devised this way is because during your character's personalization phase, the gear and the way

you level up abilities matter in the results of each level. Indeed, there is a great deal of skill needed when in-mission, but some missions will become unplayable if you've chosen the wrong path. Anyway, what I'm saying is that these games focus on the mastery of engaging and challenging mechanics, as well as testing yourself.

Now, from all extrinsic motivators that you can come

up with, the ones keeping you playing for months are those that are purely intrinsic for you. If we adventure into the domain of psychology a bit deeper, we find that individuals find no interest over certain things, and trying to catch their attention with these is useless. Steam achievements? Not for me, thanks. Some other things, however, extrinsic motivators, will be effective only for a certain period of time. I'm more than willing to spend some time unlocking new characters, but they better be different and worth it. Lastly, there are those motivators that are truly intrinsic, those that really pique your interest consistently and that keep you engaged for hours. This, for me, is the narrative content. Sadly, once a story reveals itself as shallow and worth only one run-through
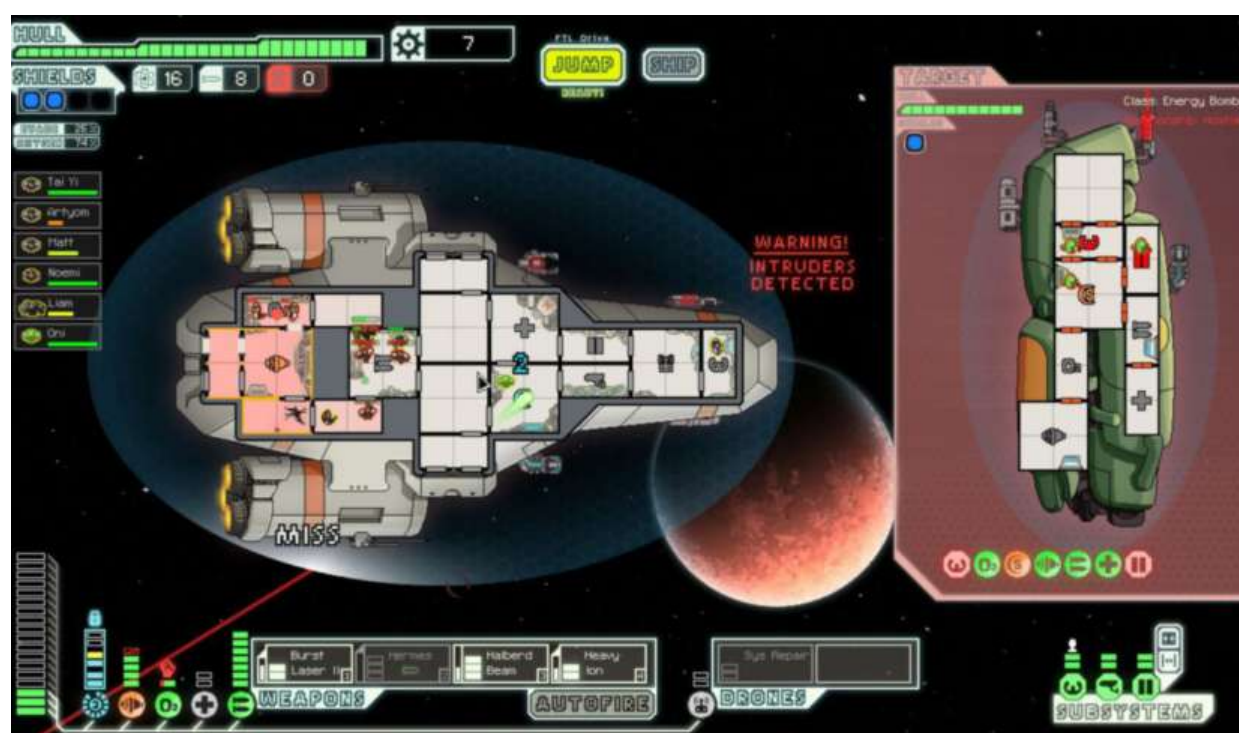
Roguelikes are Not my Cup of Tea

(ahem, Invisible Inc.), there's not much to do other than moving on to the next game.

I never played Skyrim as a personal quest to level up my character, like some of my friends. "Check out my level 60 argonian, man!". Meh, don't care. I never looked at how many Xbox achievements I had. I didn't mind being in the first prestige of Call of Duty, or having less badges to show, as long as I had enough weapons to keep playing. I'm not a social gamer, so my rewards must be enjoyable on my own, savoured in the solitude of my dark gaming room. And this comes as quite the revelation for me, as I know that I can appreciate roguelikes, but I

don't have to sink as many hours as the internet world claims to have done. Such a relief! The rewards each person gets and appreciates from each game are different for each person. You don't have to care for my story and characters, and I for your achievements.

Gamification seems like quite an artificial term, manipulating players into spending tons of money and hours in front of the screen. However, it is not. Gamification can be simply summed up by asking yourself "why do I play this game?", or "why don't I play this game?". It helps us understand what kind of gamer we are, and this can potentially be translated into understanding what kind of

person we are. What keeps us motivated playing games can be used for our own advantage; we must know what games to seek or where our weaknesses as a part of the audience are. They give us a bit of insight regarding our own subjectivity, which is worth exploring by ourselves. And I do love roguelikes, don't get me wrong. It's just that, because of their nature, they don't compel me into spending a gazillion hours in them, but only a few. And you know what? I don't care what Yahtzee says, FTL bored me after I unlocked the third ship.

Forcing gamification? Well, that's a different story.■
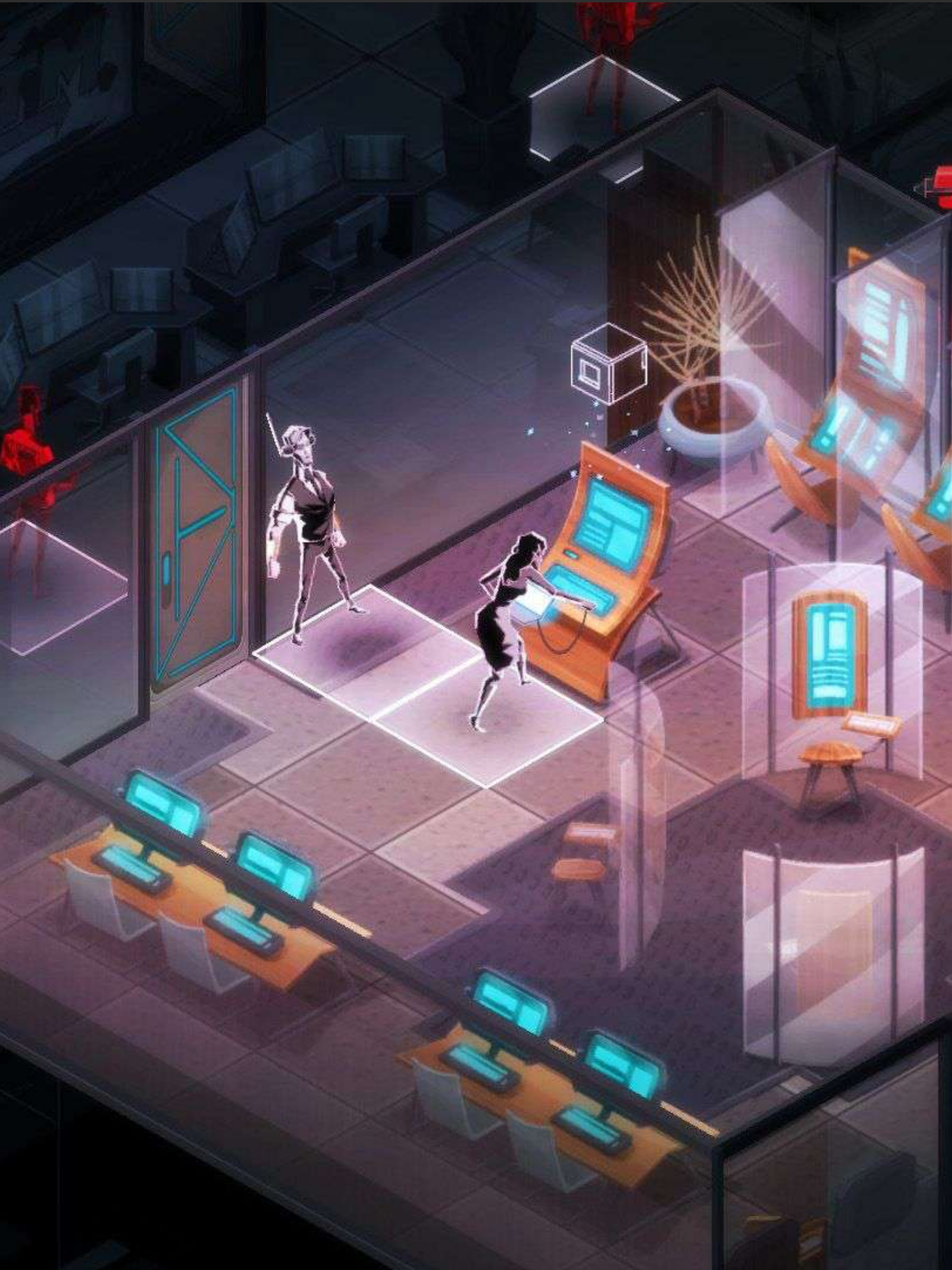
Improving Your Game of Rocket League - Part #1

After many hours on Rocket League, James comes to give us tips.

By James Bralant

Rocket League is taking the gaming world by storm. Free on PlayStation Plus in July, just £14.99/$19.99 on PC, with fast-paced and addictive multiplayer, easy to play and hard to master controls, shareable and competitive gameplay - it's a dangerous concoction of gaming bliss.

When you start to find yourself rising the ranks online, only to be getting stuck in a rut of losses despite you believing you aren't doing much wrong, you need to start asking some questions.

These questions:

What could happen if I clear the ball from my position?

Clearing the ball is a vital part of defending in Rocket League. Doing it well, on the other hand, is a skill that requires practice and good judgement.

boost speed, if you continue to hold down the respective accelerate or reverse buttons. This is especially effective if your back is to your goal, and there's a high chance of a counter when you are high up the pitch with no boost.

Boosting is effective for a lot of reasons but most of the time, when you want to cover long distances in a short amount of time, flipping is the best way to go.

Boost when you want to change speed quickly, make a minor speed adjustment as well as demolishing or knocking away an enemy, otherwise, flip like there's no tomorrow.

Do I have time to rethink or rework my shot?

Taking your time in key situations such as goal line clearances and absolute sitters by the opponents goals are the best thing you can do, because you don't want to mess those up.

You will look like a right simpleton if you go crazy fast towards an open goal,

Wondering what your opponent is doing, waiting in the middle of the arena, whilst you sort yourself out for a clearance? Then you need to be cautious of where you are clearing the ball. If you have the time, assess where your opponent is and make it difficult for them to score, whilst getting the ball away from your goal, or into a position where you can make a more effective clearance. Remember that

sometimes, playing the ball TOWARDS your goal can be the best option, as it wrong foots your enemy, and in some instances, pings the ball back towards your scoring target.

Should I boost or flip in this situation?

Amateur players may not know that flipping 3 times in a row, backwards or forwards, actually brings you up to full-

as the ball trickles into your field of view, just to whiff into the back of the net. Take, your, time. Assess your surroundings as you normally would and keep calm. The same goes for defending. If you have the time, maneuver into the right position, and then make the clearance, don't just go crazy - you may make a mistake and cause an embarrassing own goal.

Where is the ball likely to land next?

Reading the play is one of the most fundamental things you can do to secure victories. It's all well and good going hells bells towards where the ball is currently, but you will lose more games in the long run. Rocket League is a physics game - work out the natural ball movement, see where it's likely to land and plan accordingly. It's incredible how many people whiff past the ball from miss-timed jumps, even 'Pro' players in Ranked Mode, simply because they are badly reading the play.

This is especially effective when working out how the ball bounces off walls and when it's rolling around corners; you can decide whether there is a chance for you opening up, or it is best to sit back and see where the unpredictability of corner hits directs the ball.

Which one of us is closest to the goal?

From the kick-off, you have to be sharp to what's happening. Solo duel is slightly different, but when there is 2, 3 or 4 of you, then work out which one of you is closest to the boost from the kick-off and from there, use the quick commands to signal your intent. 'Defending...', 'I'll take this', 'Take the shot' - any of them will really help out in this situation, to avoid a simple tap in.

Simply put, if you are closest to the goal, stay there, there's rarely any point in you storming out, as it's unlikely you will get the first touch. If you stay in goal and let your closer team-mate go for the hit, you can avoid conceding those annoying kick-off strikes.

You have just gained an unfair advantage by reading these questions. If everyone did the same, Rocket League would be highly competitive even at the low ranks, but the fact is, even some of the higher ranking players are falling short with some of these mistakes.

Even if just one of these questions has made an impact on you, leave a comment below telling us which one. Got any suggestions for follow-up questions? We'd love to hear them, too.∎

The Crew: Wild Run gamescom Preview

Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ivory Tower
Genre: Racing
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox 360
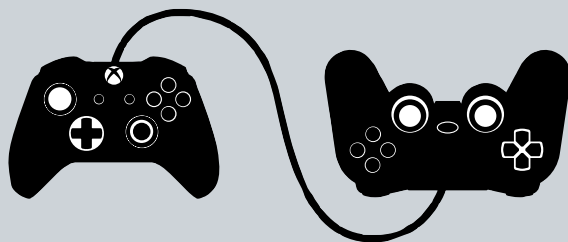
By Ryan Davies

gamescom

It's fair to say that opinions on The Crew, Ubisoft's most recent delve into the racing market, are pretty well split. Some didn't enjoy the game's online-focused world or arcadey handling model, while others found the huge open-world map of the US to be a breath of fresh air in a game that was happy to just let the player have fun. I count myself among the former, perhaps purely because it was the only game I'd ever played that didn't ask me to race on the same track twice. I still don't think that fact can be exaggerated. The brilliant mini version of the US certainly helped, and gameplay that perfectly suited the overall style of the

game. What's more, the online nonsense never really bothered me as a solo player because it was easy enough to ignore.

So it's fair to say that I was happy to see Ubisoft continue to support The Crew post-launch, as Ivory Tower is soon set to release Wild Run - the game's first major expansion. Rather than tacking on a new area to explore (um, Alaska? Hawaii?), the additions are focused on injecting new content into the already impressive game world. First up is a graphical overhaul that looks to remove the rather washed effect that the release game featured. Much more colourful scenery and stimulating lighting effects will accompany Wild Run, as well as an improved draw distance. Saying that, the buildings in the

distance of the demo I played were still rather ugly. Oh, and if you're wondering if it seems a little silly to sell graphical improvements within DLC then you're not the only one.

Dynamic weather is the next addition that could happily sit under the 'probably should have been in the release game' category. Saying that, the combination of the improved visuals and pretty rain effects is a sight to be seen. The demo I played wasn't on an especially flashy display (although it was running on PC), yet it looked somewhat unrecognisable from the game that released back in December. The fact that the changing weather actually affects the way your car handles is a sweet part of the deal, turning a feature

that could have been a little flippant into an interesting layer of the game at large.

Most of the other additions to the game are the things you've probably already gathered from flashy trailers and the like. Motorbikes are a welcome addition, although they handle like they're permanently on ice; certainly vehicles for the more experienced players - who, I assume, will be the majority of people that buy this DLC. Undoubtedly more interesting are the monster trucks and associated events. Strangely, the trucks also handle a little like they're on ice, lacking the weight I expected them to bring to the fore. I suppose it's certainly more fun to fling a weirdly light monster truck around obstacle courses. The new game

mode sees players completing stunts and running through scattered point-markers. It's functional, but there's bound to be more fun had in just cruising around the world map in a huge monster truck.

Drag and drift racing are the next two key additions, although anyone who's played a racing gaming within the past ten years will find these modes instantly familiar. Drift mode is exactly the same as every other mode in every other game despite apparently being the most requested feature from the community, but the drag mode rekindles more pleasant memories of the old quarter mile modes from past Need for

Speed games. Players have to heat their tyres before setting off, then nail the forced manual gear changes in an effort to gain the quickest speed down a simple straight line. I played this mode on the Bonneville salt flats that were tragically ignored in the release game, so that was a fun experience.

It's difficult to see how well these events will fit into the game; my slight concern is that people who have already played most of the events from the base game will be stuck playing drift, drag and monster truck events over and over until they're all complete. To me, that doesn't sound especially fun. Those who purchase the

Wild Run addition of the full game, which is being released alongside the standard DLC, certainly get the best deal as they can enjoy all of this content together. Wait though! What's that... there is actually another part of the DLC... one that Ubisoft has been weirdly quiet about? It has some catchy name that I've forgotten, but the idea is excellent - players who buy Wild Run will be able to create their own tracks for crew members to play! You just select waypoints on the map and away you go. If you ask me, this could be the best part of the whole DLC; even more tracks!

The Crew: Wild Run looks to be a fairly generous DLC pack. I've got my reservations concerning some of the new game modes and other additions, but it looks as though there'll be plenty for veteran players to get stuck into. Plus, it could be a great reason to get the crew back together for a few more races. Colour me interested, but it remains to be seen if this rather random selection of additions will gel well enough to create an expansion that will actually get players back into The Crew come the 17th of November. ∎
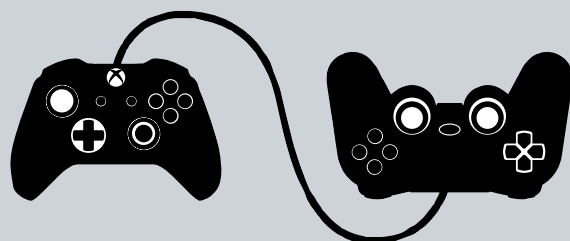
Armikrog gamescom Preview

Publisher: Versus Evil
Developer: Pencil Test Studios
Genre: Point 'n' Click
Platform: PC

Release Dates
8th September 2015 (Worldwide)

By Luke Greenfield

gamescom

When it comes to bringing something new to the table, the team behind Armikrog certainly have that in mind with this innovative Point & Click adventure game.

In Armikrog, you play as a spaceman and his pet, a blind Alien-Dog. Upon crash-landing on an unknown planet and being boxed into a tower by a vicious creature, your goal is to find a way out of a tower. But as you progress through the game, it becomes clear that a lot more is at stake.

What's so unique about the game isn't the story or gameplay itself, it's the art-

style and the way the game is captured; everything in the game, from the environments to backgrounds and even the characters and their movements, is captured in Clay Stop-Animation. It's not clunky by any means, and can be easily passed off for being CGI.

The other, very impressive note is that the entire game is made by two people. The stop-animation is filmed in a garage and rendered in an office that is smaller than the stand in which the game was presented inside. The fact that such a complex process is done in such a small place by only two people is quite astounding, especially seeing the quality of the game at the moment.

The game revolves entirely around puzzles, that must be solved using both characters in order to progress. The game doesn't hand-hold, but it does give occasional hints should the player become completely stumped.

The humour is very 'childish', described as toilet humour by the presenter. This simple humour makes the game appropriate and appeals to both younger and older players.

Armikrog is scheduled for release on the 18th of August, and it looks just about ready to be a good way to spend your week; you won't be able to finish this game in a day. ∎

Master of Orion gamescom Preview

Publisher: Wargaming
Developer: NGD Studios, Wargaming
Genre: Strategy
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now - Steam Early Access

By Ryan Davies
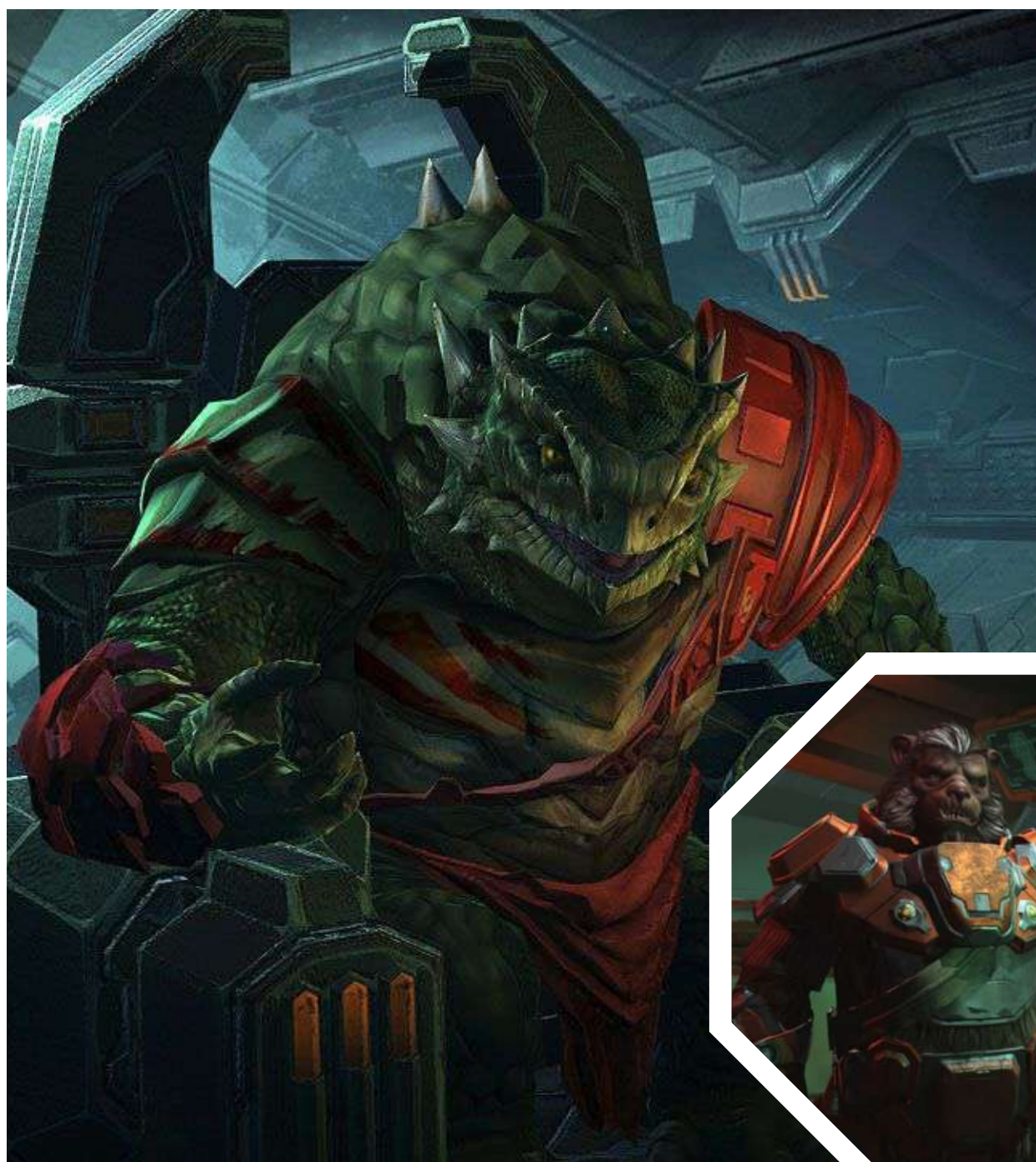
The story behind the inception of Wargaming.net's revival of classic 4X strategy title Master of Orion is an unusual one. The World of Tanks creator's CEO, Victor Kislyi, has always been an intriguing character largely due to his personable attitude towards public relations and his clear devotion to the Wargaming.net brand.

This Master of Orion reboot exists purely because of his own gaming fantasies. Wargaming's Frazer Nash explains how this new title came to be: "Atari (who owned the licence beforehand) ended up

needing to have a fire-sale. So when they did that, Victor flew to Los Angeles about as fast as he could and put in the biggest bid he possibly could to win this IP, because he loves it; it's a passion project for Victor."

If that's not a golden stamp of dedication to a title then I don't know what is. So now with the rather hefty backing of Wargaming.net, Master of Orion is soon to be back in action in a reboot that will be very much in keeping to the style and feel of the original title from 1993. Saying that, there are sure to be plenty of folks who aren't sure what that actually means. The original Master of

Orion was a very early 4X space strategy game (in fact, 4X as a term was coined in relation to the game) that many at the time likened to Civilization in space. Considering that series' continued domination of the strategy scene, the reference still holds strong, although with games like Galactic Civilizations

now knocking about it's certainly a more contested market to break back into.

Rather than any of the World of... teams, Master of Orion is being developed by the Argentinian studio NGD - a relatively unheard of team that has previously only dabbled
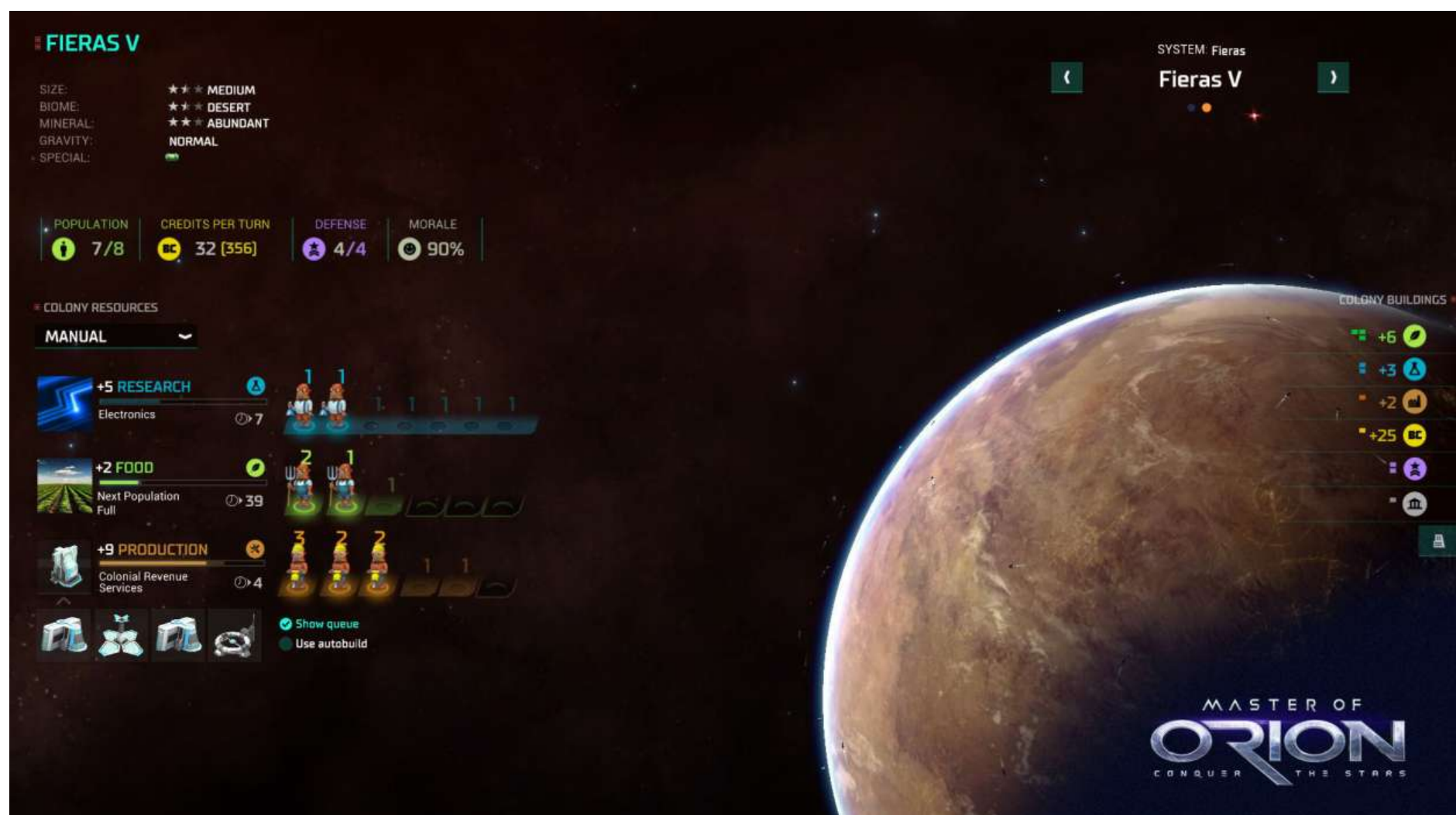
in a free-to-play MMO and a couple of licensed titles like an Adventure Time action adventure game. It certainly seems like an odd choice, but then Wargaming has been keen to emphasise that NGD has been bolstered by various pivotal members of the original Master of Orion development team. The idea behind that move is to capture the "essence of the original" and other marketing slogans that essentially mean Wargaming is aiming to appeal to the same players who loved the game back in the '90s. Although Nash also emphasised that they are also targeting the wider 4X strategy crowd that enjoy the aforementioned strategy titles.

The actual gameplay in Master of Orion is very familiar stuff; certainly a deliberate move on the part of NGD. You begin a game as one of the 10 alien races with one lonely planet, from there you must grow your empire across the stars either through diplomacy or military aggression; the four Xs in 4X all taking a leading role (that's eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate). The gameplay shown at this year's gamescom demonstrated a

tidy UI built around a good-looking game that should satisfy most strategy gamer's need for endless information. Diplomacy looks to be the best feature so far; with some options that aren't your typical strategy fare like baiting other nations to declare war on one another. Seeing the diplomatic view actually reminded me a little more of a Paradox grand strategy title rather than something like Civ - that, by the way, is a very good thing.

The diplomacy comes in alongside other classic strategy fare like an extensive tech tree, buildings that can be constructed on planets and of course military production and warfare. Based on what's been shown so far, there's nothing especially original about Master of Orion, but that's perfectly OK. Considering Wargaming.net is aiming for those already familiar with the series (or stuff like it), then all NGD need to do is provide a fun and engaging 4X title that fans of the genre can easily sink into. The hardest part, in reality, will be getting the word out - but with Wargaming's incredibly deep pockets, that may not be much of an issue after all. Nash explained that the game will be highly accessible for new players, but I'm not sure if that will even be necessary.

Master of Orion will release as a digital download on Steam and GOG some time in the future. It's worth mentioning that the game won't follow the same F2P model as other Wargaming.net titles, but rather a standard 'pay once' release. There's certainly a risk of Master of Orion blending in amongst the raft of space titles releasing in the near future, but for fans of the original games, and fans of space 4X at large, it looks to be an excellent modern revitalisation. ■

Four Huge Improvements in PES 2016

Publisher: Konami
Developer: PES Productions
Genre: Sports
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360

By Dom D'Angelillo
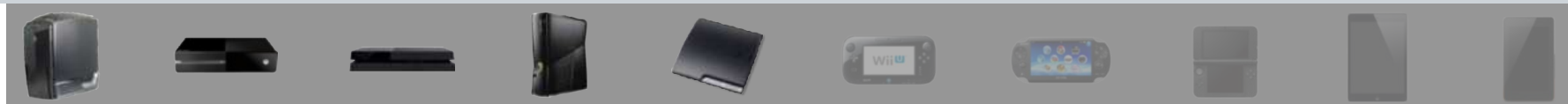
PES was well received by the industry as a whole last year, lauded for it's huge advancements and innovations. For me though, despite being a solid football game, it still fell short in several ways. This year, things look to be taking another huge step forward, and following a presentation and hands-on with Konami at gamescom, here's why.

Graphics

If you read my review last year, you'll note I said that PES was beautiful in some ways, but in others it looked dated and
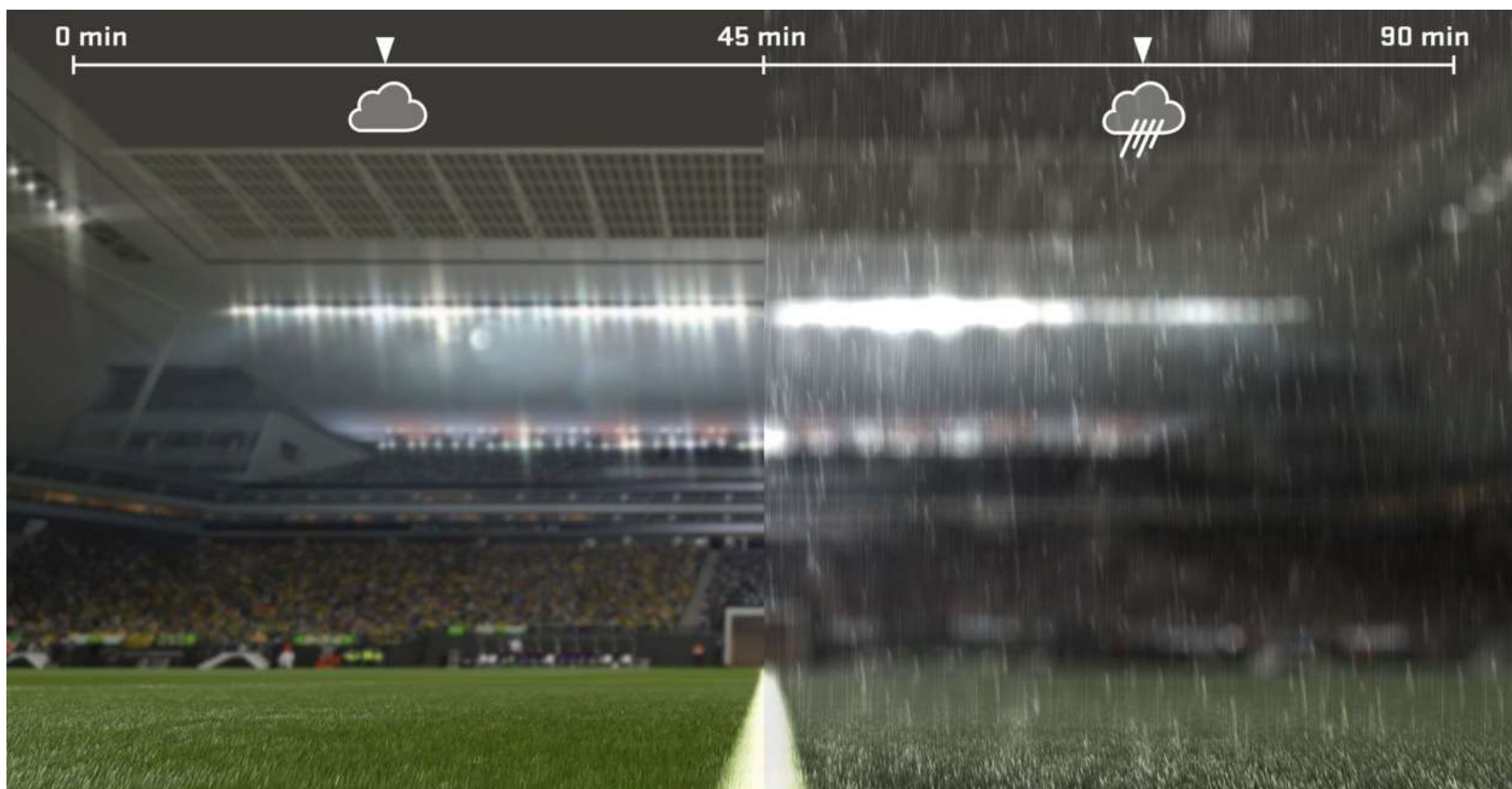
Four Huge Improvements in PES 2016

unfinished. This time around it looks as though those woes may be a thing of the past..

Despite any issues surrounding the relationship between Konami and Kojima, I was assured that the Fox engine was here to stay, and that can only be a good thing. Once again, Konami have used 3D scanning for a number of the high profile players including: Brazil's Neymar and Juventus' Álvaro Morata - both of whom feature on the cover. The leap in graphical prowess though comes from those players that weren't 3D scanned. Last year, I complained about some less than impressive recreations of players, but with the help of the Fox engine and images provided by clubs, Konami have been able to closely design a huge number of players to an amazingly high standard. Over 2000 players will be done to this standard on release, but more will be released further down the line.

It's not just the players themselves

that have had a makeover though; everything from the grass, the camera angle, the crowd, the emotions, have all been improved to a much higher standard as well as the introduction of dynamic weather. The result is arguably the best looking and most realistic football game to date.

Licenses

PES has always lived in the shadows of its EA sports compatriot when it comes to the licenses and player likenesses. While Konami are still lacking the holy grail that is the Premier League, (with the exception of Manchester United, whose official kit, sponsors and team all return this year), they are focussing on those licenses which FIFA don't have. The big news at gamescom was that Konami has secured the rights to the European Championships and this year's PES will feature the full 2016 Euros as well as official national teams. On top of this, Konami will now feature more teams from the Bundesliga, Ligue 1 and Serie A, as well as the returning Champions League, complete with music and branding. Konami has also secured the top continental competitions for another season, with the Copa Libertadores, Copa Sudamericana and Asian Champions League all returning.
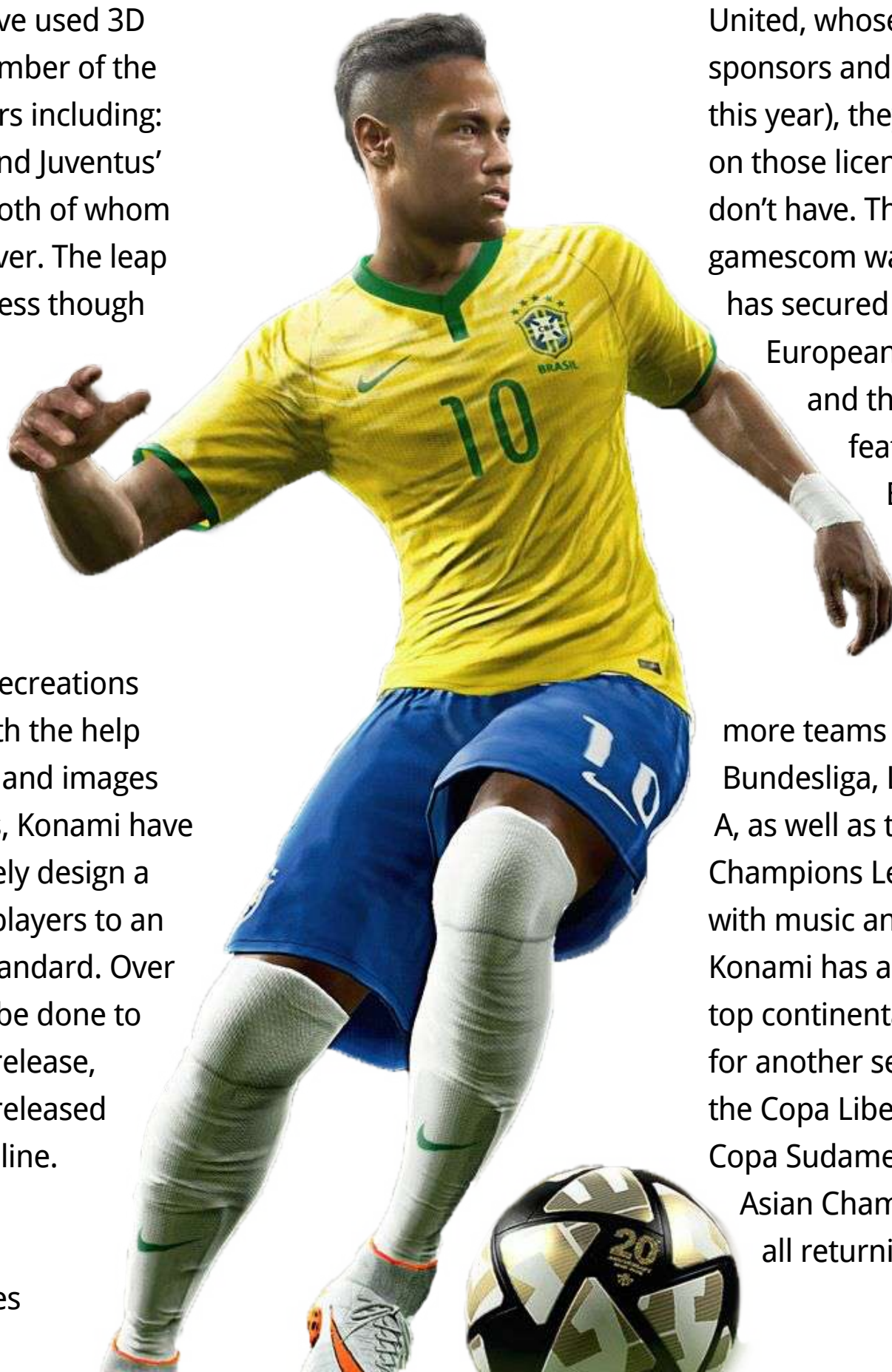
Whilst they may not be the huge and instantly recognisable brands you would associate with football, it is not at the fault of Konami, but rather the bureaucratic world of football. Konami are evolving PES into its very own thing rather than following the crowd, and through their limitations, they are becoming something equally as interesting.

Celebrations

We all have a favourite. The one that you watch on repeat on YouTube hundreds of times. Of course, I'm talking about goals, but this year sees PES introduce tonnes of celebration animations including those iconic ones that have been synonymous with your favourite

(or least favourite) players. The game doesn't just stop after scoring, now you take control and replicate some of the sport's best and worst recognisable celebrations. Everything from Gareth Bale's love heart, Luis Suarez's dueling pistols or even Francesco Totti's crowd selfie will be included in the game. And what with the improved graphics, this

makes Pro Evolution Soccer 2016 even closer to the real 90 minutes of a football match than ever before.

Moment-to-moment gameplay tweaks

Everything, as you would expect from an annualised franchise, has received a metaphorical lick of fresh paint, with a few new tricks introduced. Aside from 1-on-1 feints used to deter an oncoming defender, PES improves the general physics of each player, making 1-on-1 tackles much more realistic. Big players can barge smaller players off the ball and onto the ground, if your shorter player goes against a six-foot-eight beefcake for a header, the

outcome will be very one-sided. There is weight behind every player and you can feel it with every step and kick of the ball.

Aside from the controlled players, there have also been improvements made to the AI. Your AI controlled teammates now work together in teams of 2-3, making their existence on the pitch more important than ever. Defenders will cover optimistic teammates who fancy a dribble, midfield generals look to poach the ball from the attacking team, and attackers scream for the ball.

There are also three times as many animations in this year's iteration; everything from joy to elation. Players will contend

peculiar decisions, throw their arms in the air at a missed opportunity or jossle with opponents for the referee's attention. It all feels like a huge leap forward from last year's version and is a promising sign for the future of the series.

It all seems like a promising step in the right direction for Konami and PES, and with the demo now available, you can try out the new improvements yourself. It doesn't stop there though, as this is the 20th Anniversary of Pro Evolution Soccer, they have "so much more to do".

Pro Evolution Soccer 2016 will be released 18th September on PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Xbox One Xbox 360 and PC.∎

Mighty No. 9 gamescom Preview

Publisher: "Deep Silver, Spike Chunsoft"
Developer: Comcept, Inti Creates
Genre: Action, platform
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, 3DS, PS Vita

By Reece Armstrong

gamescom
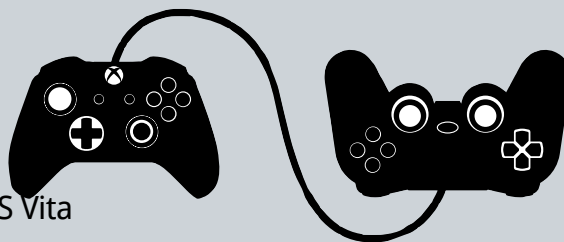
Mighty No. 9, has been highly anticipated for a long time now. The game, made by Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune and his team at Comcept bears a resemblance to retro action-platformers. Fans are understandably eager to play this instalment by the legendary game designer and news of its delay is surely a harsh blow to those waiting. With a release date set for Q1 next year, Mighty No. 9 is frustratingly close to being a reality for fans. From what I saw of the game at this year's gamescom it is going to be a well crafted, charming title that should appeal to fans of the genre.

I got to see a number of levels that demonstrated simple yet hard to master gameplay mechanics. You play as Beck, a robot who has the ability to transform and absorb Xel, the particles that make up robots. The visuals are vibrant and colourful and give charm and personality to the game. The entire aesthetic has an air of childlike wonder to it and it's no surprise that the game is being made into an animated

Dr. Sanda
Your plan is working perfectly, Will!
He'll be safely up the tower in no time.

TV series. The pleasant visuals contrast massively to the gameplay though, which is tough and demanding.

Mighty No. 9's gameplay consists of a mix of run and gunning and platforming. Reminiscent to Mega Man, Beck is equipped with an arm cannon to defeat enemies. Whilst you can use this weapon to get you through the levels, you will want to be using Beck's other ability, dashing, to net you the most points. Dashing is like it sounds, Beck dashes forwards propelling him at a speed much faster than running. You can clear gaps and even use dash multiple times to extend your time spent in

the air. It's used to get under small gaps and upon seeing gameplay of Mighty No. 9 it became clear that this mechanic lies at the heart of the game.

Dashing is not only a useful platforming tool, but also a combative one as well. Dashing allows Beck to absorb the Xels of other robots, but this can only be done when enough

damage has been dealt to them. This sounds easy in theory but the real test comes from acquiring the highest possible points by absorbing enemies when they begin to glow. It's made harder by having to know how many shots it takes for enemies to become absorbed. The game becomes a rhythmic twitch based puzzle where reflexes are key if you want to gain the most points. Earning a string of combos isn't easy and you'll want to time your dashes perfectly to gain 100% absorption from enemies.

The dash mechanic extends into bosses as well where it can be used to defeat them at the end of their health. Missing the dash is a crucial mistake that allows the boss to regain some of their health. Transformations are a key part of boss fights as well. During the game Beck learns other robot powers and can use these to his benefit. The boss fight I saw was Battalion, a militarised robot mounted with a gatling gun and a missile launcher. Whilst possible to defeat without transforming, the boss was susceptible to freeze attacks from one of Beck's transformations.

What I've seen of Mighty No. 9 has got me excited for its release. The accessible core gameplay makes it easy to play but difficult to master. Perfectionists are going to have a tough time getting 100% combo ratings as quick reflexes and flawless runs will be required. The incentive for replaying levels is high with different awards handed out for completing stages in certain ways. Co-op modes, challenge stages and a back-to-back boss mode make Mighty No. 9 a complete package.

Mighty No. 9 is set for a 2016 release for PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, Linux, Wii U, 3DS and PS Vita. ∎

WWE 2K16 gamescom Preview

Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: 2K Sports
Genre: Sports
Platform: PS4, Xbox One

gamescom

Subtlety isn't something that you would necessarily associate with the world of WWE and wrestling, yet the opening video during the WWE 2K16 presentation at gamescom was certainly along those lines. A barren, scorched desert lay untouched. A single figure, walking away from the camera, shovel in hand, suddenly stops and begins to dig. Was this some deep metaphor or poetic justice? Certainly not, it was legendary wrestler 'Stone Cold'

Steve Austin, who stars on the cover of this year's edition, digging up the Smoking Skull Belt he won back in 1998. Picking it up, he turns around and walks towards camera: "it's time to raise some hell," he mutters. Wrestling normality is restored once again, and it's back to the carnage and theatre inside and out of the ring...

That Roster Though...

...And it's the atmosphere and theatre of a wrestling event that 2K are focusing heavily on this year. After all, as Bryce Yang, brand director, told the group, "in a way, what happens outside the ring is more important than what happens in it." While he's certainly not doing any disservice to the fighting that goes on within the ring, he's referring to the carnival atmosphere, the personalities and crowd interactions, all of which make wrestling and wrestlers unique. This has been such an important part of this year's game in fact, that after conducting research, they discovered fans wanted more playable characters, giving them a greater number of iconic names. The result is

almost double of last year's 67 name roster, with 120 'unique characters' available from the beginning.

I asked 2K to clarify what they meant by 'unique characters' and they referred me back to their earlier statement. Watching Irishman Finn Bálor's entrance, complete with rock music, timed lights, and pure drama, his personality shone through, I'm not really brushed up on my WWE knowledge, but instantly I could see his demeanor, his attitude and style. "The lighting, the LEDs, the ramp, the video, the

timing, the colour. There's so much that goes into every one of those characters, and we've [got]120 of them."That's what they mean by unique!

It's not just unique in the sense of appearance and fighting style, but everything you associate with wrestling. Regardless of whoever you adore or loathe, enjoy watching or desperately avoid, they all have unique entrances and you'll be able to instantly recognise them.

It won't just be the fighters themselves that you'll recognise, too. When push comes to shove

within the ring, the fully mo-capped move sets will allow those trademark throws, pins and specials to add to the unique character experience. On top of this, WWE 2K16 adds in over 2,000 brand new animations, including moves, reversals and emotions, all which aim to fully immerse the player amongst the more diverse and realistic crowd.

Customise and Create

Of course, WWE 2K16 doesn't just stop there, and being the second year developing with a new engine, the team are constantly building and improving on the previous year's iteration, "it's just like the last 15 years" Bryce told me, "there's always things they'd like to add and sometimes you just can't." In this instance though, it seems those going into WWE 2K16 are going to be spoilt for choice based on the options given.

If it's part of the WWE world, chances are there's something customisable for you. We were told that this was a fan favourite part of the game; being able to stamp your own, personal look on it. With that in mind, WWE 2K16 offers customisable: shows, belts, rings and, for the first time, you can create your own Diva in a mode that will likely go head-to-head with the Superstar Creator which returns once again. Of course, like last year, you can scan your own face into the character creator in order to get your Superstar as close to real thing as possible.

...Now With Playable Former Governor of California

Speaking of face scanning, all of the 120 playable characters have had their likeness scanned in and used within the game, so whether you fancy playing as Seth Rollins, Kane, Triple-H, Colonel Mustafa or any of the other wrestlers,

every emotion, glance and snarl will be caught directly from the person themselves. This even stretches out of the wrestling universe and into the crossover, by which I mean Arnold Schwarzenegger's induction into the roster as two versions of the iconic T-800.

Arnold, according to Bryce, had "been great as part of the project." Not only was he willing to get his face scanned like the rest of the roster, but he has been a huge part of the marketing campaign, starring in an advert and being very active on social media promoting the game itself. Of course, The Terminator is currently only available as part of a pre-order bonus, but the comments from Bryce suggest that he will later be available as part of standalone DLC. Without definitively saying yes or no, I was told with regards to The Terminator being available to those that didn't preorder that "if you look around and see similar offers around the industry you can probably find the answer pretty easily."

Other packs of DLC, similar to the those that went into last years iteration will also likely

be featured. Again, feedback from fans found that packs with characters and storylines were preferred by the masses; after all, wrestling fans love a good storyline. Although there were no solid dates for DLC, it's a safe bet it will be drip fed for a long time, adding to the WWE 2K16 experience.

If you love wrestling you're going to be completely enamoured by what 2K are offering in this years edition of the game. It's bigger, better and more beautiful than last year's, and every tidbit of information released pulls you in just that bit more. WWE 2K16 has the
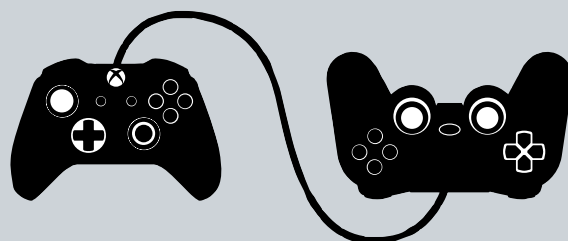
perfect combination of old school classic fighters and the new, up and coming generation, so which ever side your bread is buttered, the 120 playable characters will more than quench your thirst to wrestle. With 2,000 new animations, brand new customisable game modes and the classic Hall of Fame career mode, when October comes around it'll be "time to raise some hell".

WWE 2K16 will be released on 27th October in North America and 29th October in Europe on PS3, PS4, Xbox 360 and Xbox One. ∎

Back To Dinosaur Island 2 gamescom Preview

Publisher: Crytek
Developer: Crytek
Genre: Action
Platform: PC

Release Dates
TBA

By Reece Armstrong

gamescom

Virtual Reality had a big showing at this year's gamescom, with developers demonstrating demos on Oculus Rift, Project Morpheus and more. I had a chance to sit down with Crytek and experience their VR tech demo, Back To Dinosaur Island 2. My experiences with VR before this had ranged from good to nauseating so I didn't know what to expect from this demo. I had an inkling it would be immersive and picturesque as it was being made by Crytek but I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

The title, Back To Dinosaur Island 2 should give a clear idea of the demo's setting. I was using the Oculus Rift Crescent Bay and whilst the build quality wasn't at retail standard, I was told the image quality was. Sitting down in a swivel chair I was able to rotate my body to take in the scenery without having to stretch my neck. This helped avoid any awkward body motions, that being a particular problem that has occurred in the past with other VR demos. I was given an Xbox 360 controller and was told to only

use the left and right trigger buttons which controlled my hands. I was tasked with scaling a mountain using a system of cables to hang onto. Before starting I was warned not to let go of the triggers, as falling was not a nice experience.

Beginning the demo I was instantly placed in front of one of the cables suspended in mid-air near the bottom of the mountain. The visuals were a pleasant mix of lush greens from vegetation and red and browns off of the mountain wall. The setting had a real sense atmosphere, a river ran in the background, flowing with white wash that cascaded vividly down the rocks on the riverbed.

Back To Dinosaur Island 2 gamescom

A crashed spaceship rested in the distance and a strange alien-like structure was also positioned in the landscape. I was immersed and the demo had yet to truly begin. To climb the mountain I had to use the cables provided, grabbing onto the connected bar with both hands. The simple concept was made enjoyable as my view required me to lean in to reach the bars. If I was too far away I would have to lean closer. It was a novel use of VR that engaged my field of view and the surrounding environment.

Further up the mountain I had to switch cables which required me to let go with one hand

and then find the next handle. At first this was fine as the handles were close together, but as I scaled higher, certain handles became harder to reach. Vertigo kicked in and a sense of dread came over me at the idea of falling. I knew it was a mind-game but the setting and height of the mountain made it feel very real.

As I got higher I saw movement on the mountain wall and pterodactyls dropped into the sky, swooping within the clouds. Certain ones attacked me as I climbed and I had to attempt to dodge them. At

another point rocks tumbled from above, making me stop climbing to avoid them. Eventually I reached the summit and clambered over the edge. When before I had been too preoccupied with climbing and avoiding the dangerous pterodactyls, now I could bask in the scene before me. I turned around first, to see where I had climbed from, and saw the dizzying height of the mountainside and the gorgeous

view that ran far off into the distance. The river was below, a waterfall ran parallel down one side of another cliff face, it was stunning to behold.

Behind me was a vast canyon which was littered with what looked like a crashed alien spaceship which could very well be my own. My last task was to scan points of interest. Small beacons appeared on the screen and I had to look directly at them and hold the triggers to complete the scan. The scan would detail facts about the points of interest and a robotic voice would tell me when the scan was finished. It was the least engaging part of the demo but seeing a wide field view of the alien planet was astounding. After I finished all the scans the demo ended and I was brought back into reality.

The Back To Dinosaur Island 2 demo made me a firm believer in Virtual Reality. There's great potential for an immersive setting and story and the demo showed me that Crytek are on the right path to this. Speaking to Crytek after the demo I was told that it was part of a large project their working on called Robinson: The Journey. I wasn't told much but the premise is that you play as a 12 year old boy who has crash-landed on an alien planet. I asked about the limitations that Virtual Reality has on gameplay and they understood my concern. I was told there would be 7 methods of traversal during the game and considering how engaging the climb had been, I am definitely eager to see more.

Robinson: The Journey proved to me that Virtual Reality is a very plausible gaming tool. Crytek understand this and see it as a home product, to be used by gamers everywhere. One noteworthy point is that during no time in the demo did I feel nauseous. The experience was smooth and comfortable, merging the right amount of joy and fearful sensations, resulting in an exhilarating ride. Virtual Reality is something to be aware of, now more than ever and Crytek may just be the biggest contender coming with it. ∎

Five Changes Coming to FIFA 16

Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Canada
Genre: Sports
Platform: PC, PS4, PS3, Xbox One, Xbox 360, Android, iOS

By Dom D'Angelillo

We got a chance to play Fifa 16 behind closed doors at this year's gamescom. Aside from the improved graphics, updated teams and UI tweaks, here are five of the biggest changes that you can expect to see later this year.

Women's Teams

Perhaps the biggest and most poignant change to Fifa 16 this year is the introduction of the Women's international teams. 2015 has been a huge year for the women's game, with both the World Cup and FA Cup Final being televised in front of huge audiences.

Through the introduction of women's international teams comes the chance for a whole new fan-base to take to the FIFA platform and play as their newly found heroes. While they move and play just like their male counterparts - their performances captured in typical FIFA style - the devs at EA told me that the most difficult part was adding the physics of ponytails... and they look great!

More Balanced AI

When an improvement is something vague like this it's often hard to tell if you can feel the change or if it's just you unknowingly accepting

the PR talk. In fact, while playing Fifa 16, you can feel that your team is more of a team. They work harder, move more and generally aren't a nuisance like they can be. Defenders are much sharper, if you've tracked a player and left a gap, the closest AI team-mate will step up and cover for you. Midfielders are now wiser and read the game more, intercepting passes or slowing down counter attacks; and forwards are incredibly dynamic, making off-ball runs into space and demanding the ball. Everything adds to the on pitch experience and make the team feel more unified.

Trainer Mode

If you're not accustomed with the complex controls of the FIFA series, then this year EA have introduced a brand new in-game mode. Easily turned on or off within the pause menu, the trainer mode is an on-screen prompt which will surround the player-controlled character. Simple things like prompts to pass or tackle start you off, but as you become more familiar, the trainer introduces more complex commands, like low crosses, through balls or stepovers. Whatever your skill level, you're certain to learn something you perhaps wouldn't have known without this mode.

Draft Mode

A new feature in FIFA's iconic Ultimate Team mode allows for a smaller, more concise
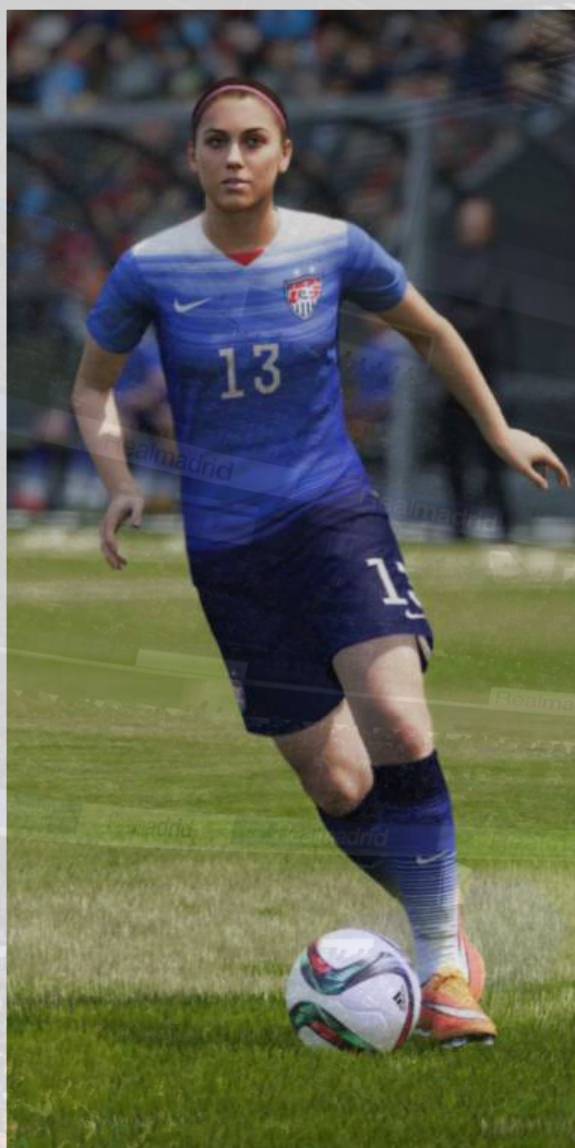
Ultimate Team experience. Testing your 1-11 team building skills, you have to pick a formation, captain, manager and starting 11 from the five options given to you. Then, online or in single player you play four matches and earn rewards (coins and/or FIFA points) for each one; with these you then edit your team as appropriate for the best possible team chemistry and repeat the cycle. It's a quick and fun way to familiarise yourself with the Ultimate Teams mode without the headache of contracts and training, and allows you to play with some of the best players in the world from the get go.

Pass With Purpose

Of all the new features, this is perhaps one that has the most resonance with hardcore fans of the series. When it came to passing you had two options, a simple ground pass or a through ball. The pass with purpose option is something of a combination of the two. Pressing the R2/RT button while passing will initiate a quicker, more accurate ground pass, allowing for quick counter attacks or defensive clearances without the fear of losing possession.∎

Typoman Updated gamescom Preview

Publisher: Headup Games
Developer: Brainseed
Genre: Puzzle
Platform: Wii U

Release Dates
2016

By Ryan Davies

Typoman was a surprise hit at last year's gamescom, and by far one of my personal favourite games of the convention. It's a basic platformer in most ways, but the ingenious use of words to form puzzles and scenery is something completely unique. It's well worth checking out my initial preview of the game to get a general idea for the game. For this preview, however, we've got more of a check-in to see how Typoman is coming along. The short version: very nicely. One big piece of news aside, the game is clearly in very good shape, and after another small gameplay session at this year's gamescom I'm happy to report

that this should be every bit the revolutionary platformer I was hoping it would be.

That big piece of news, however, could cause some problems. I was surprised to be handed a Wii U gamepad to play the game this time round, a rather clunky change after last year's much more comfortable Xbox controller. Still, I figured I'll be free to use my normal controller once the game releases. Well, no, that's the big news - Typoman will now be released exclusively on Wii U. Of course, I'm happy that Brainseed Factory's clever little title has been deservedly recognised by such a big publisher (with the game going under Nintendo's Nindies@ Home program) but, to put it bluntly, I don't have a Wii U.

For those that actually own a Wii U, this is sure to be great news. There certainly aren't enough inventive platformers on the console, with the likes of Ori and the Blind Forest and Limbo missing from the line-up (although it looks as though Limbo will finally be coming soon). Yet there's no point ignoring the simple fact that most gamers own either

a PS4, Xbox One or PC. I was obviously a little saddened to hear that Typoman would be a Wii U exclusive, not just because I won't be able to play it, but because I feel as though the game deserves more. Exclusivity to the least popular console available is sure to limit the attention Typoman will get, and from I've seen it deserves a lot. Maybe I'll be proven wrong; I can only hope so.

The exclusivity deal aside, the game is certainly shaping up to be a fantastic little platformer. The brilliant word-play puzzles that impressed me in my first play through were back in force this time round. My favourite example by far being a series of platforms with 'crush' written on them, that the Hero has to run past before they squash him. Of course, that's not exactly exciting or original, but as the platform moved up the 'c' in crush would be left behind, encouraging the player to 'rush'; past the trap. It's a very small change from the standard fare, but even this far less interactive example was enough to put a smile on my face. The level was filled with other puzzles in which the word-

as effectively as the simpler puzzles. Still, balancing the game out with running/jumping and more considered and layered puzzles is a great way to go, and something that should easily carry players through the 4-5 hours play time. In this regard, Typoman is looking very Limbo; with a short play time but one that's filled with constantly evolving ideas.
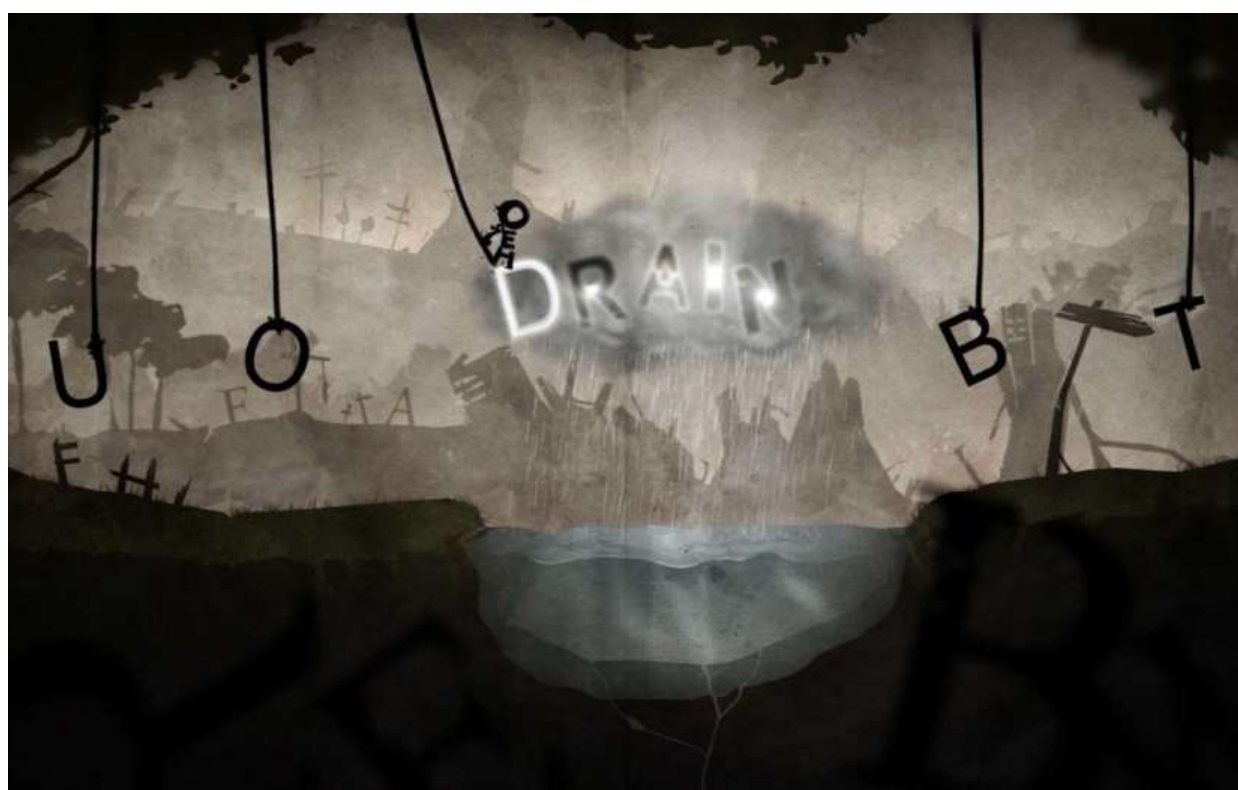
play was far more important, but that one stuck out to me due to its wonderful simplicity.

I also got to try my hand at a much more difficult level that involved the Hero teleporting to different parts of the level in an effort to bring a collection of words together. It was good fun, although it didn't use the word-play system quite

Typoman is due out towards the end of this year, and will obviously be exclusive to Wii U. Here's to hoping that ends up being a timed exclusive... ∎

Kingdom gamescom Preview

Publisher: Raw Fury Games
Developer: Licorice, Noio
Genre: Strategy
Platform: PC

Release Dates
TBA

By Dom D'Angelillo

K ingdom is one of those rare games that comes from humble beginnings and has the potential to instantly stun the masses. It's not a AAA action packed shooter, or an alternative puzzle platformer, but a simple, pixel art, strategy-cum-tower defence game that stole my heart at gamescom from the get go.

In what was originally designed as a Flash game, Kingdom is the brainchild of Dutch developer Thomas van den Berg. His idea, which began life as a simple 8-bit drawing of a man on a horse, has since been picked up by Raw Fury Games and is now being rebuilt for PC, Mac and Linux.

The premise is simple. You take control of a randomly generated King or Queen -- the game generates everything

from gender, to race, horse colour, attire and regal flag -- and have to build your kingdom, making it secure from beasts and bad guys who fancy their chances come nightfall. You roam across the 2D-plain using your coins to build walls, watch towers, farmland and weapon depots, everything that helps make your kingdom impenetrable and create income. Walls and defences can be broken down without game over being declared though. Unless the crown is taken from you (i.e you are killed) the game continues; while your inhabitants lay maimed and walls crumbled, it's business as usual until you've had the beautifully blunt 'No Crown, No King' appear on screen.

As for the day/night cycle itself, it's still a working progress, while I'm sure it will be perfect come release, I couldn't help but feel it was a little too quick. This was particularly noticeable during earlier stages as you familiarised yourself with the essentials.

The game was described to me as a minimalist strategy, everything has a purpose, working together for a single

goal, but I also felt there were elements of a tower defence game, the build, upgrade and protect parts that are so established within the industry. Imagine a tower defence where you roam the tower walls from the ground, rather than with a god-like view, and you've got the idea.

It doesn't stop there though, and Kingdom's beauty shines through once you leave the relative safety of the kingdom walls. This is perhaps where the strategy side begins to surface and the tower defence drifts off. To the left and right of your

under construction kingdom is a randomly generated wilderness, the further you traverse, the greater you will be rewarded. During my playthrough, I came across chests brimming with cash, overpowered and angry enemies, shrines which can upgrade infantry and straggling members of the public ready to be recruited for your kingdom. It's the risk-reward combination that you get in any exploration game, on a simple and digestible scale.

To tell you that Kingdom is beautiful would be like telling you that nighttime is dark. The simple design, originally based on limitations of a Flash game, transcend into the gaming mainstream and

looks as relevant as a AAA cinematic. The world is a mystical landscape with swaying trees and moving clouds, the water in the foreground reflects the surrounding world in a calming manner and fires crackle and pop as night turns to day. You can tell everything has been carefully thought of, everything is there for a reason and there's no sign of filler or unnecessary images.

Everything, from the look, the feel and the sound of Kingdom should be enough to convince you to play. While there is still no solid release date, the guys told me it would likely be released late this year or early next, but it's ready when it's ready. Having played on a PC

via a Dualshock 4 controller, I was also quick to ask if Kingdom would be coming to consoles. Again, there was no definitive answer, but I was told that they wanted to eventually roll it out on consoles, after all, it felt completely natural playing with a controller.

With that in mind, if you're looking for a calming, beautiful and tactical experience, then whenever Raw Fury decide the time is to drop Kingdom, I implore that you try it, regardless of platform.

There is still no hard date for Kingdom's release, but you'll be able to play it on PC, Mac and Linux when it drops. ∎

Into the Stars gamescom Preview

Publisher: Iceberg Interactive
Developer: Fugitive Games
Genre: Simulation
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now - Steam Early Access

By Ryan Davies

gamescom

Space, despite its great darkness and seeming emptiness, is an incredibly beautiful expanse. Despite that, I would venture to say that few games have ever really captured that beauty. Too often incredible vistas are replaced by star-dotted black spaces, and while that's understandable given the vastness of it all, I've long awaited a game that captures space in its true form. My very first impression of Into the Stars completely astounded me. A single spacecraft floated in the centre of the screen, in the middle distance a vibrant green planet with wisps of solar dust floating around it. Stars twinkled in the distance while moons and asteroids

stood as wonderfully textured obstacles in the dark, but strangely colourful sky. It may have been an exaggerated and compact version of space, but it looked fantastic.

We can all rant over and over about how graphics don't make a videogame, but in that brief moment I was totally sold on Into the Stars. I knew nothing else about the game, yet instantly I could see the potential. Let's ground things a little though, because as great as the game looks, I certainly am a believer in the 'graphics are made to enhance' philosophy. Thankfully, developer Fugitive

Games also seems to be making a highly accomplished space exploration game to work in tandem with those beautiful visuals. If you're a fan of FTL, Out There! or other games in that vein, then you should really pay attention to the following.

So yes, it'll be very difficult for Fugitive to avoid the 'prettier FTL' comments, and in fact the developer I spoke with essentially said the same thing. For fans of that game, I can only hope that you've got a penchant for more space exploration. What Into the Stars may do however, is bring a lot of new eyes to the genre at large. The

game is currently available as part of Steam Early Access, and while it's far from a finished product, there's actually quite a lot of content to play through. Plus, the procedural nature of the game means it's a relatively unique experience every time you play. Starting with a basic spaceship, you have to kit it out with parts and fill it up with the resources that should carry you through space.

There are a fair number of choices when it comes to ship customisation, each of them encouraging you to play in a slightly different way. Once your ship is loaded up, it's off

into the endless (although pretty) void of space. Well, it's not actually endless. In fact, the whole aim of the game is to reach the other end of the game area as you slowly run away from an alien threat. That constant push to avoid the more powerful enemies is a fantastic motivator, and while FTL deals in turns, Into the Stars is all real-time. The more time you spend extracting resources from planets, or saving fellow humans from falling colonies, the closer the dreaded Skorn (the game's baddies) get to you. With a warning voice announcing their proximity to your ship, things can get a little tense at times.

So, that'll prevent you from overly exploiting a single planet, but it also gives each search a brilliant sense of peril. What you'll actually be doing on that planet is entirely up to you; there's the option to mine for additional resources, thereby incurring a solid minigame in which you move the drill through the resources you want. Or you could launch a recon mission that sees your spacecraft recruit new crew members, gain ship improvements or maybe, well, fall into a trap. All of these missions, including the mining, are given a chance of success that depends on the competency of your crew members. Obviously the aim is that you'll grow attached to

these crew members - although at the rate I was losing them I found that a little tricky...

Combat is another important element of the game, although it's another somewhat unusual element that plays further on the real-time style. When locked in a fight, you're charged with placing crew members on different parts of your ship, be it lasers, cannons, shields or the medibay. You can then use these sections to fight the

battle, selecting each section in real-time and using them on enemy ships. This is further complicated by a weird colour-code mechanic in which you have to fire weapons that are coloured differently to the enemy ship's shields. Equally, you have to activate shields, at the right moment, that match the enemy lasers. It's odd, no doubt about that, and while I didn't quite get on with the mechanic during my playtime, I can see the possibilities.

Into the Stars, as mentioned, is a worthwhile venture even at this early stage. There's a lot more to come (heck, the devs have even mapped it out on Trello!), and no doubt the game will grow and morph during the development process. 'A pretty FTL' may be a fitting title, but I'd bank on Fugitive Games making it mean much more than that by the time the full game releases. ∎

Press [F] to Interact

Aurelius

A desolate, younger planet. Its blue hue is due to the high amounts of methane in the atmosphere. Uninhabitable for humans, but rich in resources.

Dub Dash gamescom Preview

Publisher: HeadUp Games
Developer: Incodra
Genre: Arcade
Platform: PC, iOS
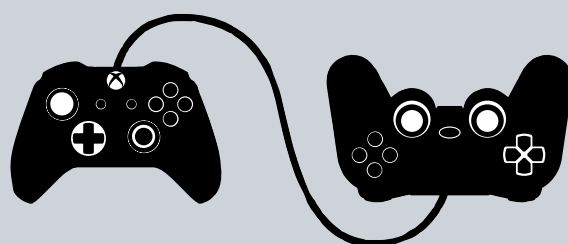
By Dom D'Angelillo
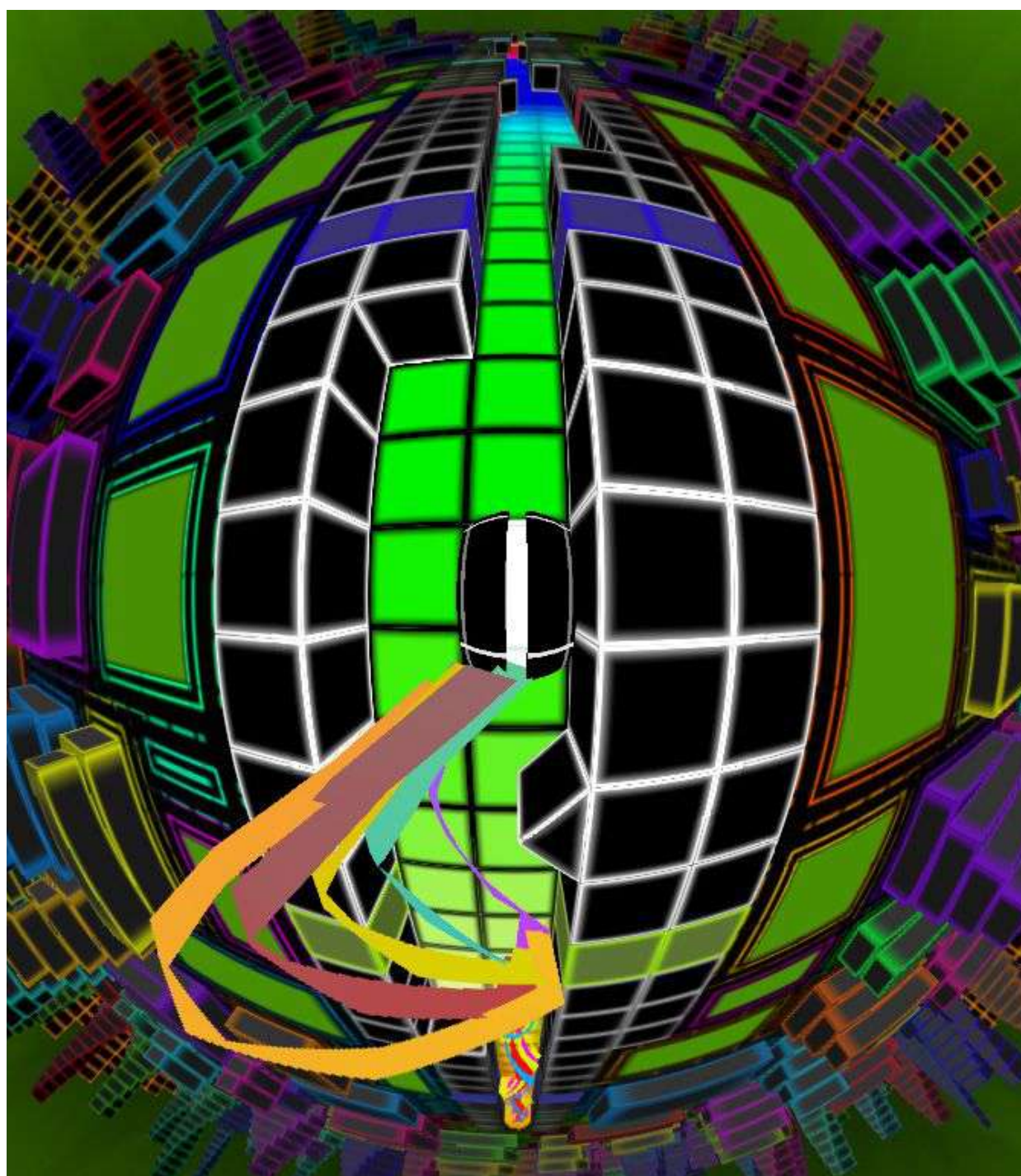
I n a nutshell, Dub Dash is one of those games that will have you tearing your hair out, laughing hysterically, screaming in anger and then suddenly realising that four hours have passed and you're still sat on the toilet.

Coming to both PC and mobile, Dub Dash is a fast-paced, rhythm focused, endless runner with a huge focus on a dub based soundtrack and a neon trance style. During gamescom I got a brief hands-on with the upcoming title, and within moments I was instantly hooked.

The aim is to navigate through levels, avoiding obstacles with

a simple tap of the screen (the hands-on was with an iPad). Simple. Well, not quite, it's not an endless runner in the usual sense, as once you reach the end of one set of obstacles, you are teleported elsewhere and the game becomes an entirely different beast.

After finishing the initial third-person stage, tapping your ball past obstacles, you are taken to a side scrolling stage and are now in control of a spaceship. Tapping and releasing raises and drops your craft, and suddenly the game turns into something along the lines of the Flash game Copter. The change came as a welcome surprise, it keeps you on your toes and forces you to change your playing style, something which I don't think

I've seen before in a game of this ilk. The longer you play, the more difficult the levels will become, and the change from third-person, to side-scroller soon becomes second nature.

There's something very hypnotic about the style of Dub Dash too. The flashing lights and futuristic style are reminiscent of shinier, more polished F-Zero vista, pulling you in and keeping you transfixed on the screen like a magpie to a piece of tinfoil. The dub inspired soundtrack ensures that your dances around obstacles are timed with beats, this doesn't just help get you in the rhythm, but also provides a catchy soundtrack that goes perfectly with the aesthetic.

If one thing is certain Dub Dash is going to be one of those games that you see and hear all of the time, even when you close your eyes.

It might not be the AAA, third-person action adventure games that so often steal the show, but it isn't trying to be either. Dub Dash is an addictive game, perfect for playing on your commute, in a queue, on the loo or whenever you have a spare few moments to pass. Once you get the hang of it, you'll be hooked for a long time to come.

Dub Dash was part of Head Up game's huge line-up at gamescom 2015 and you can get it on iOS and PC 8th October. ∎

Super Dungeon Bros gamescom
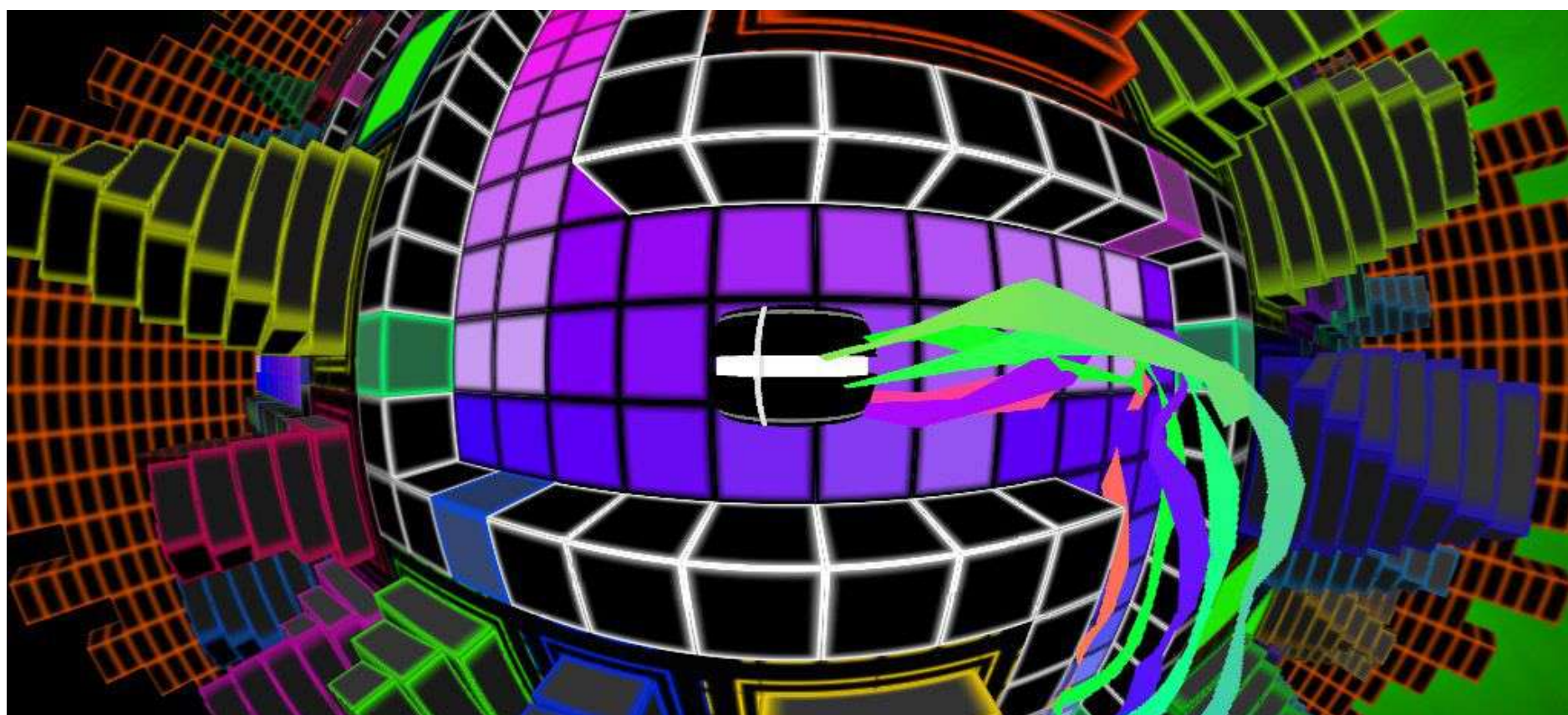
Super Dungeon Bros gamescom Preview

Publisher: Wired Productions
Developer: React Games
Genre: Arcade
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Winter 2015

By Ryan Davies

gamescom

Dungeon-crawlers have always featured a less-than-serious tone. Even the more imposing end of the spectrum, featuring the likes of Diablo and Dungeon Siege, has kept its tongue firmly in its cheek all these years.

Super Dungeon Bros, a new dungeon-brawler from Wired Productions and React Games, takes that nonchalant tone to a whole new level. From the first moment you lay eyes on the game, it's clear the whole thing is going to be rather silly. In a game that's based around up to four player co-op however, silly is exactly what you want. Who needs a deep storyline and complicated gameplay when you've got your friends launching you off of buildings or balancing on your head?
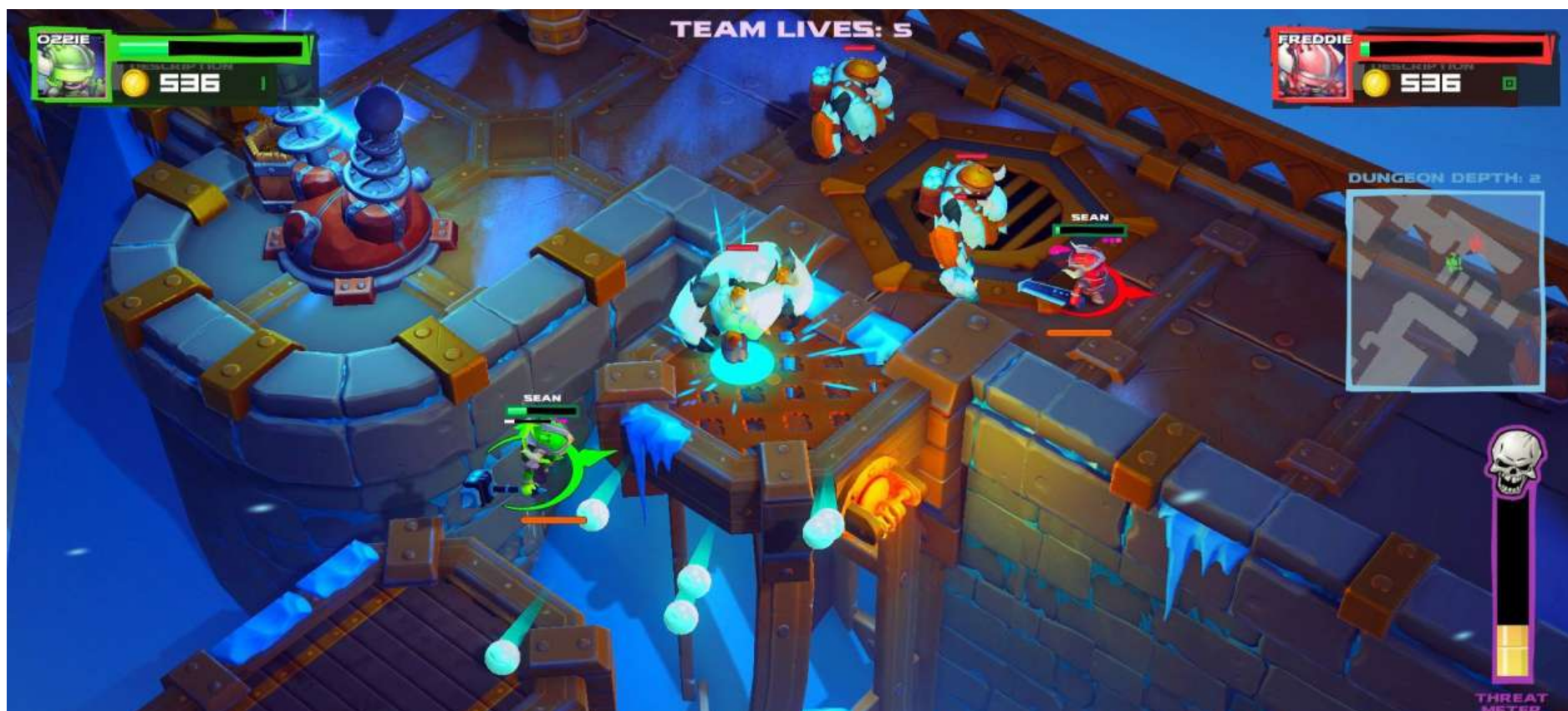
The premise is pleasantly simple: Super Dungeon Bros is an action game in which you and three other friends barrel through procedurally generated dungeons, taking out bad guys and upgrading your personal 'bros' as you go. I'm sure you've seen this kind of game before; afterall, the last console generation was loaded with co-op games of this sort. Admittedly, the genre petered out a little towards the end of the generation, but with the PS4 and Xbox One now fully in their stride, there's no better time for small developers to jump back on the co-op brawler band-wagon. Set within an amusing rock-and-roll world appropriately titled Röckheim, players take control of Axl, Freddie, Lars and Ozzie. You can pretty much see where to rest of theme goes from there; locations within Röckheim include Cryptheim, Chillheim and, yes, Bogheim. As mentioned, it's supposed to be a little ludicrous, just like the slitted-glasses wearing protagonists and the array of weapons they can use. Crossbows, hammers, swords and wands are obviously pretty standard fare, but the game allows users to craft and upgrade their weapons as the game progresses. The options I saw at this year's gamescom seemed fairly elaborate, so that should be a fun element of the game that allows for a fair bit of replayability.

Of course, the randomised dungeons are the real clincher in the replayability department. Plus, those who prefer to go it alone will also be treated to a single player campaign - how exactly this will play out has yet to be seen, but here's hoping it incorporates the amusing theme properly. The four player characters do seem to be a little on the annoying side, but I'm sure they could provide more than a few laughs along the course of a story that doesn't take itself too seriously... or seriously at all. Considering the whole game is based around co-op, I'm assuming players can jump into the campaign, although this should become clearer as we near release.

So far, so similar to every other title in the genre - excluding the theme, although that's sure to

online or on the same couch, to work in tandem to take enemies down. The most basic example of this is the Bro Throw, which simply sees one player launch another towards the bad guys - or, you know, off the map. Other moves include the Bro Nado (really) in which players stack on top of one another and swing for the fences. It's a good way to get players interacting, rather than just blasting through oblivious of one another. The section I played was quite

be a make or break factor for most people. Super Dungeon Bros is looking to bring a little innovation of its own with some cool tag-team moves that allow friends, whether they're playing

tricky too, and I can only assume that these moves are important if a team wants to succeed later in the game.

Another unusual element is the game engine. Super Dungeon Bros will be one of the first games to release using Unity 5, an engine ideal for the game's random environments. It's also perfect for cross-platform play, as such the game will be available on both current-gen console as well as PC and ac.

Plus, in a bid that could really bring some extra attention to Super Dungeon Bros, crossplay will be possible between Xbox One and Windows 10 and, separately, PS4, PC and Mac. That leaves a lot of options for friends who own different platforms, and is sure to help the game get off the ground. With all of this, it's the ideal title for the likes of PS+ or Games for Gold, something that could broaden the game's horizons even further.

Super Dungeon Bros is due out sometime before the end of the year. It's shaping up to be a great way to lose a fair few hours alongside your friends, and while there are certainly plenty of co-op experiences already on current-gen consoles, this is one that, with its cartoony art style and simple gameplay, could find a much broader market than those that have come before. We'll be keeping an eye out. ∎

Gremlins Inc. gamescom Preview

Publisher: Charlie Oscar
Developer: Alexey Bokulev
Genre: Strategy
Platform: PC

By Ryan Davies

A Moonlight Job   Properly Placed Bribe
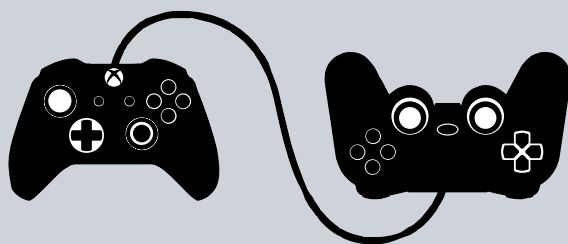
gamescom

At gamescom, pleasant surprises can be a bit of a rarity. There are often plenty of surprises, no doubt about that, but 'my word there are even more people here this time' isn't generally a particularly nice surprise at all. Thankfully, I had one very pleasant surprise this time around at the hands of Charlie Oscar, the studio that has created a fantastic looking game called Gremlins Inc. As a boardgame-videogame hybrid, Gremlins Inc. occupies a genre that very few are currently exploiting, with most successful ventures coming from boardgame publishers that have decided to have a pop at making digital versions of their

most popular physical games. So a completely original game of this type is really great to see.

Saying that, the first thing I noticed when I entered

Charlie Oscar's small booth at gamescom was a full cardboard and dice version of Gremlins Inc. laied out on a table in the corner of the room. Being a huge
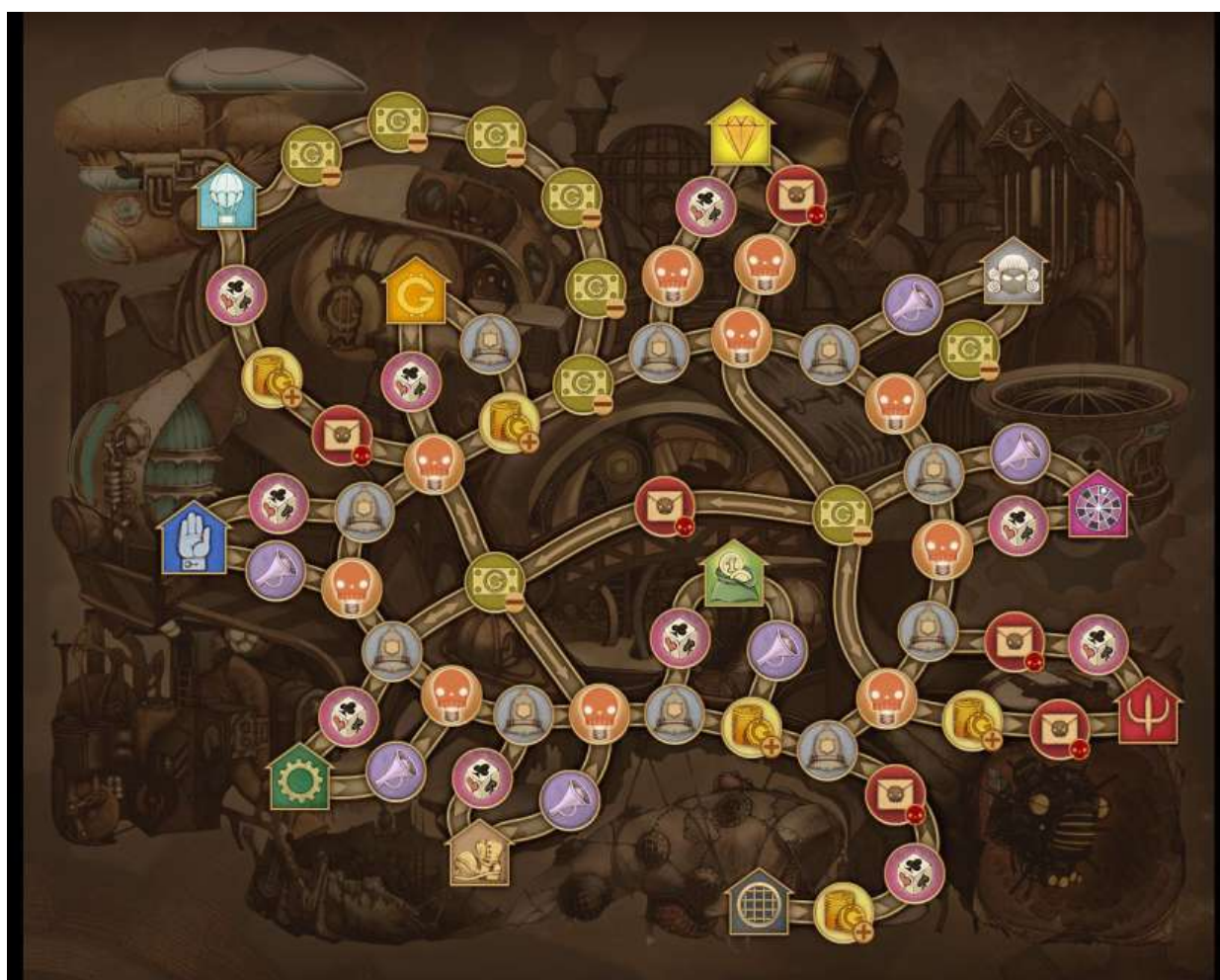
boardgame fan in my own right, I was instantly drawn to the beautifully detailed gameboard and chunky stack of cards. Apparently the developers had originally created the game in this classical form, but soon realised that so much of what they wanted to do with the mechanics required the kind of calculation and management that only a computer can really handle without things becoming horribly overcomplicated. I've played Russian Railroads, I could feel their pain.

So now exclusively available in videogame form, Gremlins Inc. is a more American-style boardgame that sees players take on the role of a greedy little Gremlin whose only real purposes in life are to become rich and powerful while inflicting as much misery on other Gremlins as possible. The core of the game runs on a card system that sees gamers play two of the 150 overall cards on each turn, one in an effort

to move around the board, and one to use the actual effect of the card. As you can imagine, a lot of those cards are centred on messing up the plans of your opponents, so games have a strong directly competitive element that some boardgames try to avoid (afterall, pissing off your friends and family while you're in the same room can be dangerous). For the more cutthroat gamer, this should be a treat.

The game board itself is a wacky design that looks more like a steampunk version of Mousetrap than anything else. Thankfully, Gremlins Inc. is looking a little more original that the perennial 'broken bits' boardgame. The game features an inventive system in which players must move around the board from location to location in order to play certain cards. The bank, for instance, allows you to play cards that generally boost your gold. Or, to use a more interesting example, the casino lets you perform actions that involve a degree of risk. There are 11 buildings in the game, each of them bringing something different to the game. Personally, I love this mechanic as it really forces players to pay attention to other's actions in an effort to predict their following moves. In a game where dicking over is a primary goal, it's important that actually performing horrible deeds is easy and accessible.

The rest of the game works in a classic 'gain the most victory points' style, although there are some neat little systems that keep things spruced up. Like the mayor mechanic in which the player with the most power (one of the in-game resources) is voted mayor of this terrible township. With that position you're able to influence draws as well as avoid nasty fines that are doled out on certain spaces of the gameboard. Or there's the prison system in which players can be institutionalised by peace-keeping (or selfish) other players. Once locked-up, the naughty player must play through an intriguing luck-based mini-game in an effort to escape. There's a lot that stands Gremlins Inc. apart from other boardgames, let alone other videogames.
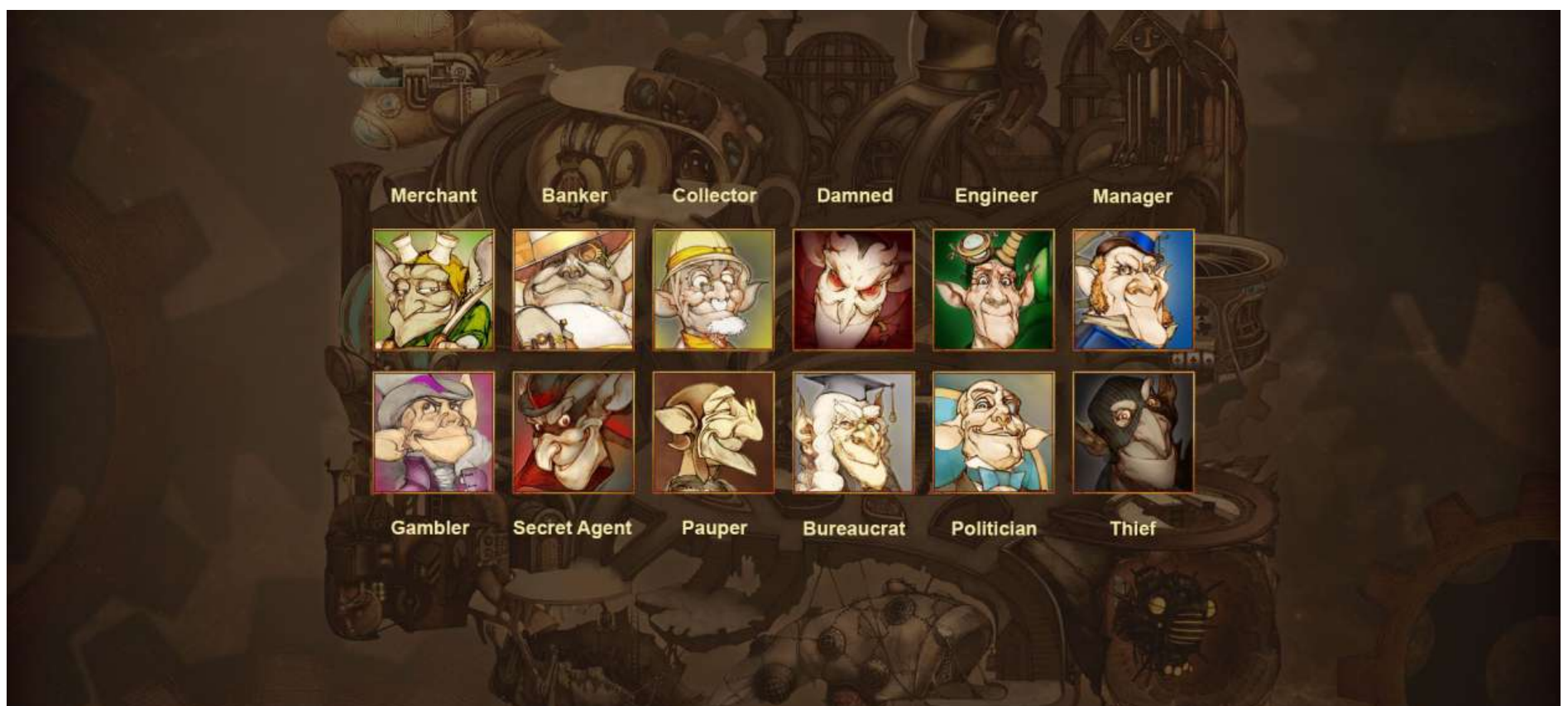
Locations on the playing field (clockwise from top left):
**The Astral Plane, The Bank, The Treasure, The Court,
The Office, The Market, The Casino,
The Plant, The Dump, The Jail** and **The Inferno.**

All of this great stuff is wrapped up inside a beautifully drawn steampunk art style that genuinely adds to the feel of the game. Plus, with some fabulous thematic text in tow, it's hard not to love the overall presentation of Gremlins Inc. even at this stage in the game's development. I've been a huge advocate for more boardgame design influencing videogames, and to see a developer take that point so literally is a breath of fresh air. I spent more time with Gremlins Inc. than with any other game at this year's gamescom, and I hope that fact speaks for itself. The game is set for a beta release in September, a beta that should add some cool new things to the game like a team mode. If you love boardgames or strategy videogames, it's well worth keeping a greedy eye out for Gremlins Inc. ■

Crossout gamescom Preview

Publisher: Gaijin Entertainment
Developer: Gaijin Entertainment
Genre: Action
Platform: PC

By Dom D'Angelillo

Vehicular combat has had something of a renaissance in recent times. With the likes of Warner Bros' Mad Max and Batman: Arkham Knight, games in a number of instances are harking back to the days when car combat was a huge genre.

The likes of Twisted Metal and Carmageddon have both, tried to to rekindle the 'good old days' of head on collisions and over the top explosions but fallen short of expectations. Crossout, the latest free-to-play MMO from War Thunder devs Gaijin, looks to truly bring back our obsession with destruction. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, you are

challenged to build your vehicle and destroy everything else.

Unlike other MMOs, there are no character classes. Instead you are given free reign to design, build and test your vehicle, nothing is impossible. As long as you have the required parts and they fit, you can make whatever your car combat heart desires. If you ever played a street racing game before, then the customise tool is going to feel very familiar. Easy to use menus mean you can easily see what you have at your disposal and the drag and drop tool makes every small tweak and upgrade a dream to implement.

Car parts; be it weapons, shields or the more 'real world' wheels and cabin sections are earned through playing and levelling up, while Gaijin has also brought in a trade system enabling players to swap and exchange goods on the market.

Crossout's true USP is in it's diversity though. In only a small presentation and hands on

I got the impression that no two vehicles will ever be alike. You can build big brutes, all terrain speedsters, attach jets to make your vehicle hover, flamethrowers, rocket boosts, you name it, chances are it's there. But don't just assume you can make a fast vehicle with every attachment under the sun and happily race around the maps though, because physics have a huge impact on your vehicle's outcome. If the gun on the bonnet is too big, it'll tip the car forward or if you add too much weight, the car just won't move. Of course physics in a game of this ilk should be a given, but it's a

necessary hurdle and prevents dozens of overpowered vehicles roaming the map.

Once you've built your vehicle, given it a unique style and colour and are happy with it's armoury, then is the time to take it onto the battlefield. One particularly ingenious feature Gaijin have added is a test drive mode, this not only allows you familiarise yourself with the car's handling, but the test arena provides a stationary clone of your vehicle that you can unload your weapons at. Not only does this allow you to practice your attacks, but allows you to note any weaknesses in

your car's exterior that you can still address before heading out to battle, it's a very simple idea, but one that I believe will be a hugely important part of the game as a whole and the line between victory and defeat.

Creation and confirmation aside, the game plays like you expect an MMO should. The mode on show at gamescom was a simple 'destroy or be destroyed' team death-match, which took place on a huge, but somewhat hollow and unpolished map. For all the beauty and intricacies of the vehicles, the terrain seemed a bit dated and like I'd seen it

www.crossout.net

all before. The idea of a post apocalyptic setting allows for huge creativity, but there wasn't anything exciting in the world, granted, I only saw a small snippet of the game, but they should have been putting their best foot forward. That being said, the combat felt solid, and every bullet and rocket fired with real force, your car changed depending on terrain and every hit received damaged your vehicle and had a physical as well as visual effect.

It might not be the path that MMOs have traditionally gone in, but the Mad Max inspired Crossout might be

an alternative for fatigued fans of other genres as well as the way in for car combat enthusiasts. Customisation is the star of the show and will likely create a community of bonkers designers focussed on insane looking vehicles, but when push comes to shove,

it'll be the gameplay that keeps fans playing. It's still too early to predict the reception, but from what I played, it's great fun and offers something different.

Crossout is currently in beta with a full release expected later this year on PC. ∎
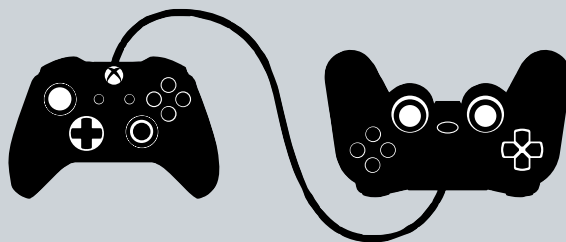
Stellaris gamescom Preview

ALPHA
is not representative of final quality

Publisher: Paradox Interactive
Developer: Paradox Development Studio
Genre: Simulation
Platform: PC

By Ryan Davies

P aradox grand strategy in space" sounds more like a fan's hopeful dream than it does a reality. For a development team that has, for 15 years, been focused on replicating the past, the idea that they would try to create a game set in the distant future always seemed difficult to believe. Yet here we are, in 2015,

with Paradox Development Studio hot off the heels of its two most successful games ever, announcing a new grand strategy game that is indeed set in space. Stellaris is looking every bit the classic strategy title that we've come to expect from the veteran developers, but also an incredible evolution of the formula that has served

Crusader Kings II and EUIV so well. While many fans of these games could well be stunted by the unfamiliar setting, this is very much the same incredible sandbox of intrigue, diplomacy and warfare.

Seeing a live gameplay demo at this year's gamescom, the first thing to notice is the incredible

scale of the game. Stellaris takes place over a sprawling procedurally generated world (universe?) map that incorporates seemingly thousands of individual planets, moons and suns. What's really impressive is the seamlessness of it all, even at this stage in the game's development. You can simply zoom out from viewing one individual planet to seeing the whole universe in a matter of seconds. Of course, that's nothing new from the Paradox team, but in the beautiful expanse of space, it feels like something completely different. Just the impressive scale of the thing is the initial indication that Stellaris isn't

one of the numerous space 4X titles already available.

The crux of the game is relatively simple: create your own space-travelling race, set them up on a home planet, and extend your power across the galaxies from there. As

in all previous Paradox grand strategy titles, that power can be gained through numerous means; be it through economic and trade means, diplomatic subtleties, military might or any combination of these primary paths. While Stellaris' exterior is more than a little unfamiliar,
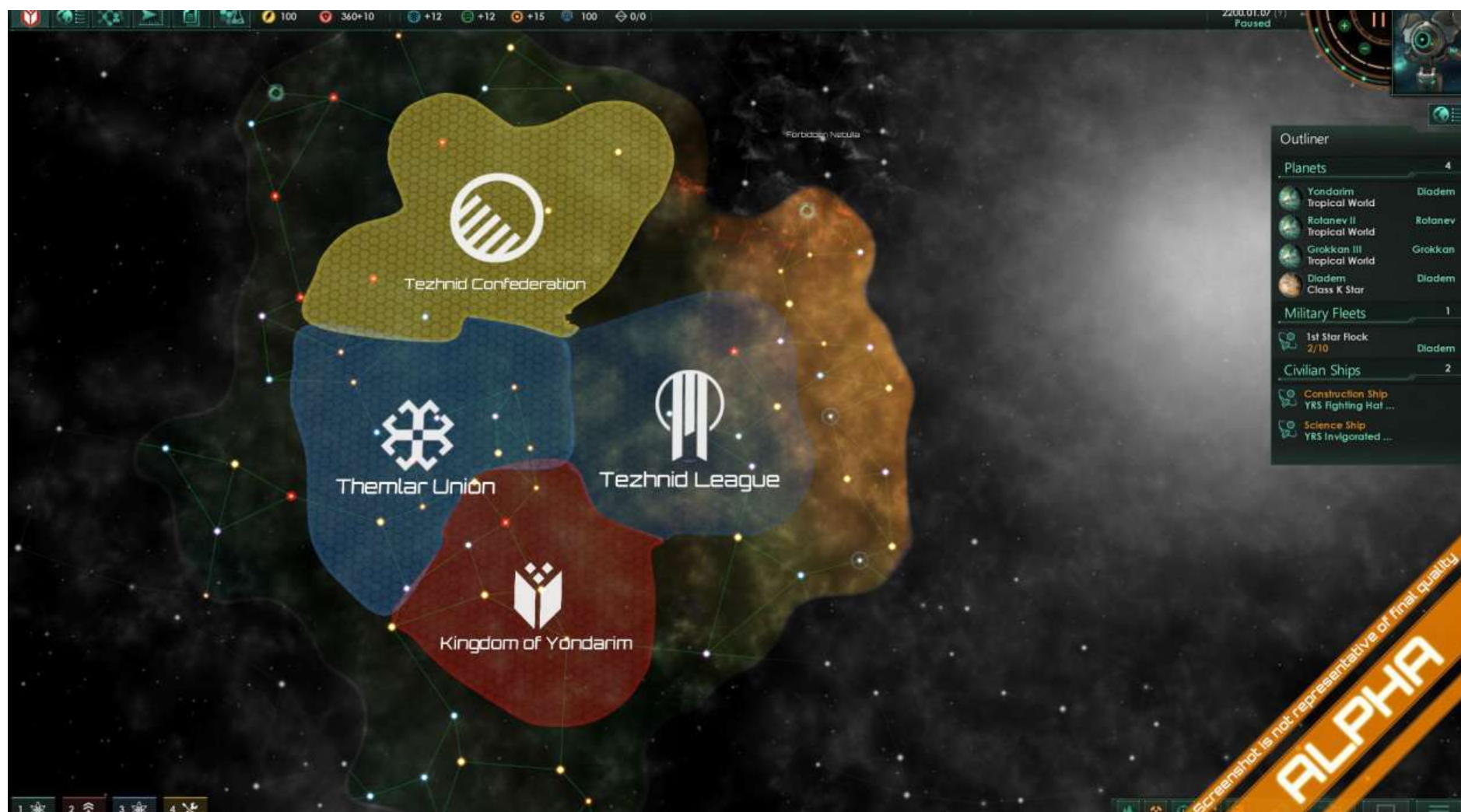
the game underneath is classic Paradox. Diplomacy can be conducted with any nation, and the options will be just as wide-ranging as those available in EUIV and the like. The ability for the player to hugely manipulate the world stage was always an important part of those games, so it's great to see diplomacy return to the fore in Stellaris.

The real-time gameplay will also feature, with players speeding up and slowing down time in classic form; even the UI was pleasantly familiar. In reality though, that's where the comparisons stop; while

the beating heart of Stellaris was clearly cloned from previous grand strategy games, everything else feels fresh and hugely exciting. An ethics system, for instance, that tracks the ethical direction of your race regarding factors like treatment towards aliens or choice in technological development. Thankfully there's no scale between 'evil empire' and 'most holy harbingers of peace', instead the ethics of your empire will have an effect on your population. Kill too many alien races and the portion of your people who support inter-species relations will start

to get unhappy. How intricate this system will be is unclear at this point, but it seems like a fantastic addition to the typically po-faced nature of these games.

In fact, the way you manage your own people in Stellaris is very different to previous games. Citizens play into an unusual system in which production on your home planet is managed through a boardgame-esque tile placement game. The details were a little hard to gather from simply watching, but it looks as though players can build one building per tile, but by

placing certain buildings next to one another bonuses can be granted. Then, each tile houses one citizen whose opinions and ideas add towards the public ethical views aforementioned, as well as other gameplay elements. I didn't quite catch all of the details on this mechanic, but it'll certainly be interesting to learn more on how it fits into the game at large.

Another element that's rather unusual for a Paradox grand strategy game is story. Admittedly, past games have always been about writing your own story for the nation you take under your wing, and Stellaris is no different. This time however, actual written narrative comes to the fore. By exploring the universe with your scientists and armies, you'll come across events that piece-by-piece tell the story of your faction with a particular focus on its origins and how it came to be. It sounds fascinating, but the challenge will be for Paradox to keep the mechanic fresh over the course of inevitable hundreds of hours of gameplay. Events aren't all based on learning about the

past though, it's possible to trigger events that could cause you serious problems - like asteroids. These random events perfectly demonstrate how moving away from historical accuracy can really help Paradox flex their creative muscles, and I'm really happy to see it.

That sense of creativity is spread to the player as well; Stellaris is

shaping up to be much more customisable than any previous grand strategy title. For starters you're able to create your own race and associated faction at the beginning of the game; not jumping into a historical scenario means each game will be randomly generated, and for the first time Paradox has made a game in which everyone starts on level pegging. No more France and its endless domination of everything. So your race's appearance, traits and initial ethics can all be toyed with before starting, and with the AI using the same system,

every game will feature new factions and races that you've never encountered before. It's also possible to customise the ships that your race uses to traverse the galaxies - or, you know, wipe out other races. The possibilities look near endless, providing yet another way to tell your own story within the game.

The way those ships look is important too, because you're going to be looking at them quite a lot. Combat in Stellaris is a bold new step for Paradox. Although control in battles will not be given to the player (as

with CKII etc.), this time you can watch space battles play out in cool cinematic style. The number-crunching that underscores all Paradox fights is still in place, but now you'll be able to literally see the effects of your military planning. You can skip or speed up fights if you know who's going to win or aren't interested, but I'm sure that it'll be fantastic to see your own customisable fleet of ships take on a new enemy every once in a while. It's just another great way to get the player more involved with the actions of his or her
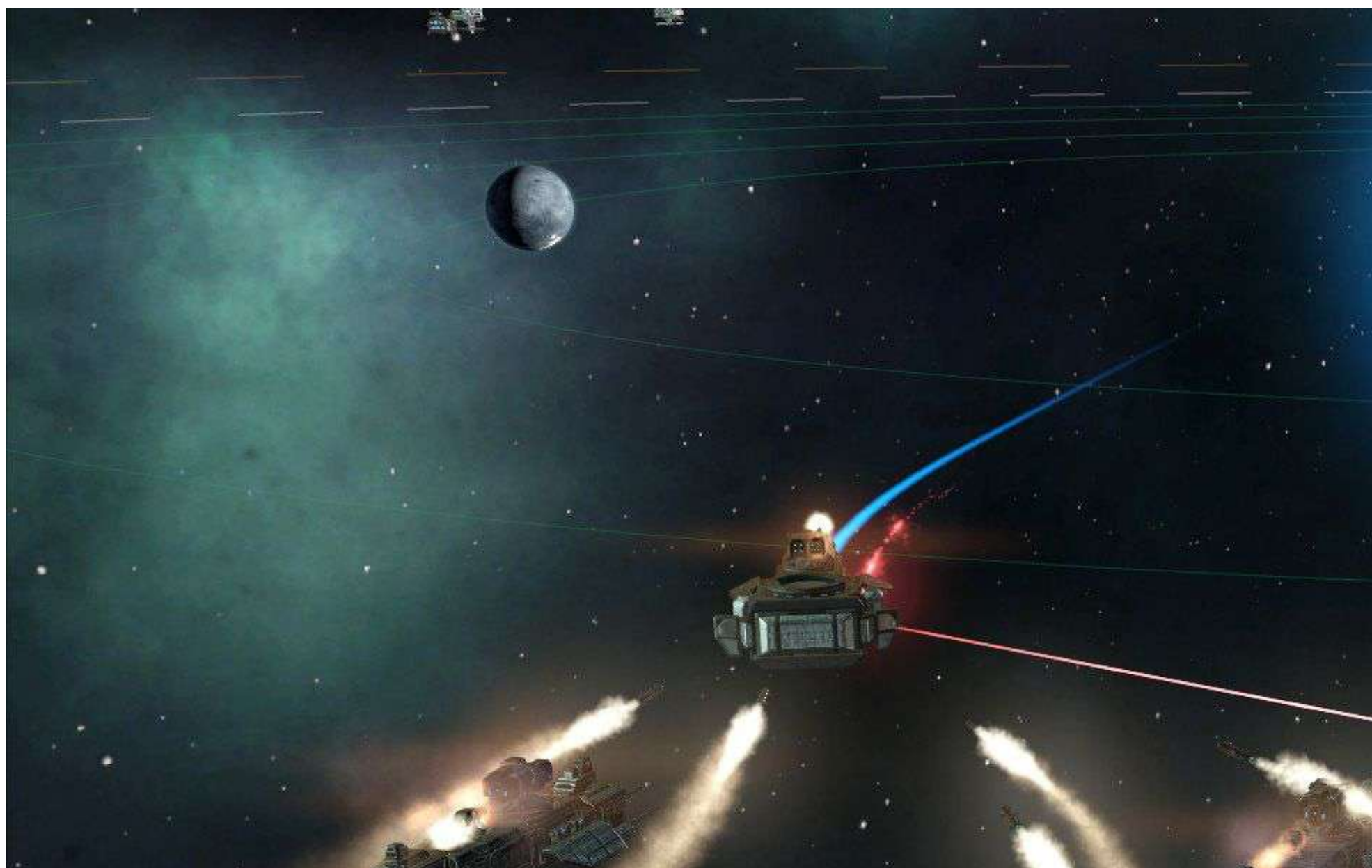
empire; bringing the game world to life in the process.

All of this incredible stuff comes alongside other cool things I noticed, like a tech tree that doesn't look terrible (sorry CKII, but that tech system is awful), as well as a sort of intergalactic UN that can be set up between different alien races and used to peacekeep the universe. Oh, and there's the fallen empire mechanic that sees certain large factions across the map dissolve into a fallen state, where they become highly dangerous, but far less technologically capable than they once were. Or you've got the 'major galactic crises' that are caused by one faction becoming far too powerful, resulting in events that conspire to bring them down. These can range from simple things like everyone declaring war on them, or hopelessly awesome things like robots turning on the faction and starting an insurrection. A machine empire in a Paradox grand strategy game is just too much for me to handle.

Long story short: Stellaris already looks incredible. No release date was mentioned during the demo, so we're probably a fair way from release (my guess would be around late next year), but even now there's just too much good stuff to comprehend. Considering the brilliance of previous Paradox Development Studio games, it's easy to trust that they've got this under control. While Stellaris is unfamiliar territory for them as much as the game world will be for the player, it's hard not to look at everything they've already announced and simply know that they've got something special here. ■
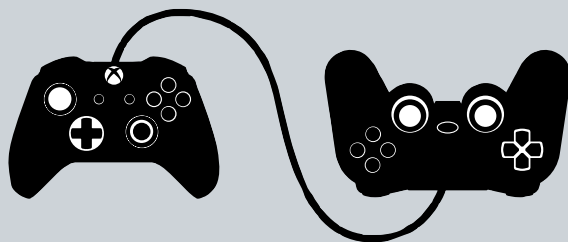
Heavy Gear Assault gamescom Preview

Publisher: Stompy Bot Productions
Developer: MekTek Studios
Genre: Action
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now - Steam Early Access

By Dom D'Angelillo

gamescom

Y ou see a lot of people when you're at gamescom. A lot of developers, a lot of PR and a lot of press all of whom blend into one game's industry amalgamation of familiarity. Visiting Canadian Indie developers StompyBot was a huge change from the norm though, never have I met people that were so passionate, so proud and so knowledgeable about their game that it really made playing Heavy Gear Assault one of the most memorable moments of the show.

Heavy Gear Assault isn't a new IP. It's not a quirky one off or hugely innovative genre

offshoot, it's a return to a series that so many fans hold near and dear to their hearts. For those that don't know, Heavy Gear is a mech shooter, a huge series that not only spans the videogame industry, but one with branches in television, literature and even card battling. To see it return is a huge deal for not only fans of the series as a whole, but also those who can't resist the lure of mech-vs-mech combat.

Imagine if a Heavy Gear entry from the 90s got a full makeover and given full, undivided attention by fans of the series, and that is exactly what it is.

Currently in Early Access, Heavy Gear Assault is, at a very basic level, a shooter. On the isolated Planet of Terra Nova, you must prove your worth against a whole host of other mechs in multiplayer duels across large maps. It's Heavy Gear bread and butter, but it doesn't just stop there. This 'relaunch' if you will, plans to re-ignite the fire and appeal to a much larger market.

February 2015 saw Heavy Gear Assault become an fully sponsored esport competition, the winner pocketing $1,200 (a humble but important starting point), there is also huge social interaction with players setting up their own profiles for fans

to follow their progress and watch livestreams. It all seems like this is what happens when a fatigued franchise gets given a second chance and it's done the right way. I could instantly tell the guys loved the project as they regaled me with stories of ongoing player rivalries and dramatic finishes to critical matches.

Like a large number of online centric games, customisation is a highly important part of Heavy Gear Assault, after all, is what everyone will see and recognise. Slow and strong, fast and weak, or stealth and nimble, there are a number of different mechs to choose from and all affect
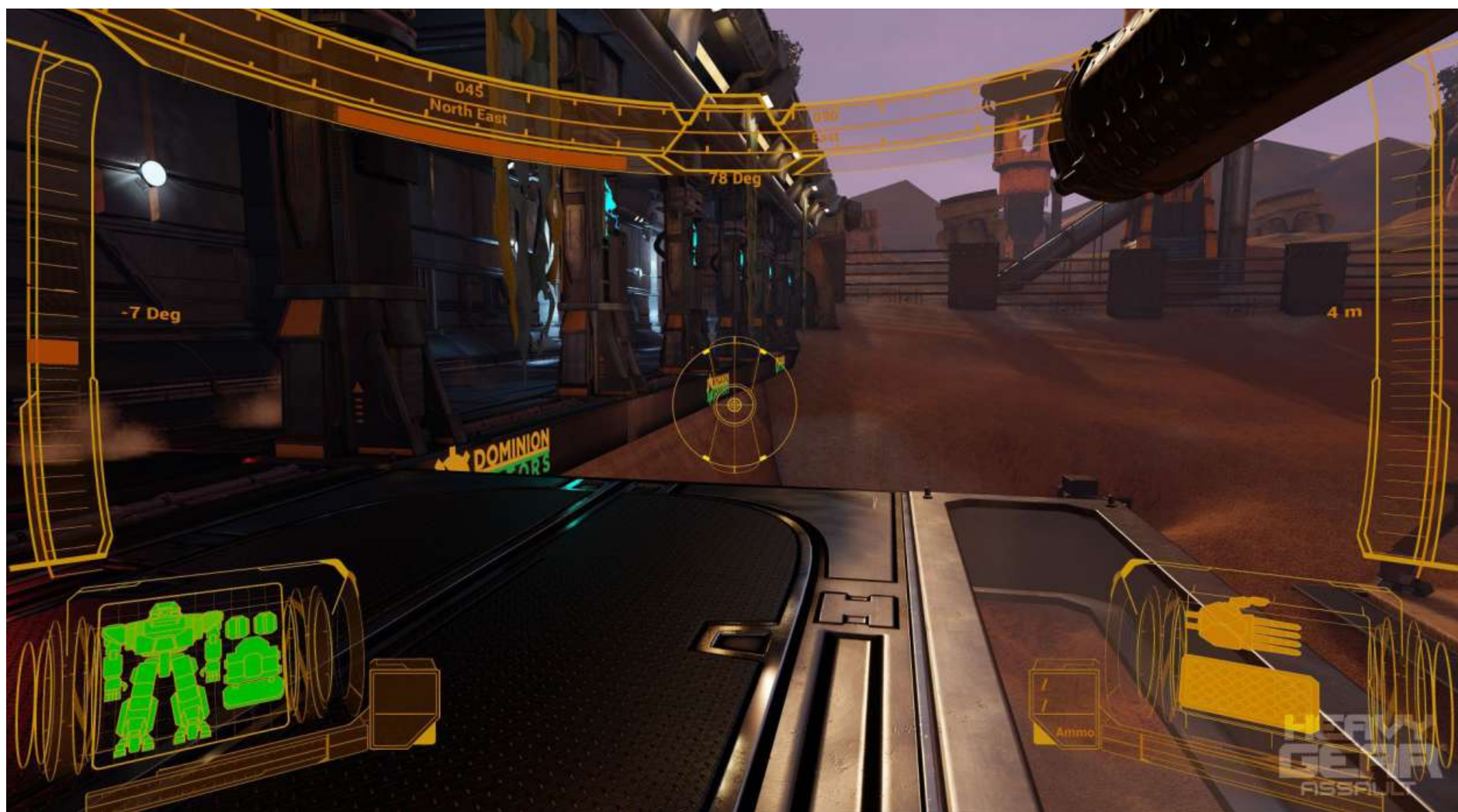
how to approach battles, but once you've chosen one that suits your style it's up to you to put your personal stamp on it. Choose the material it's made from, the style of paint, colour, decals, pretty much anything you can think of, of course different players will use this feature differently; you may have a unique, instantly recognisable and garish paint style that stands out from miles away, or you might opt for camouflage and surprise your opponents. Customisation doesn't just give you more to do, it changes how you play.

As well as that, the maps feature dynamic weather.

During my play-through, there was a huge sandstorm, which affected my vision, these required me to change my tactic, and it's something I can see having an important effect on the outcome of a battle.

Gameplay is fast paced and dramatic when battling it out although I felt there were huge periods of nothingness as you look for someone to battle it out with. Once you do find someone, the fun begins, and a fully dynamic system means that every piece of damage affects the battle. Keep shooting at arms and they (weapons included) eventually fall off

and destroying legs stops your enemy moving. What's more, if you're really a badass you can pick up discarded limbs, and use them as weapons. It's brutal, mechanical carnage!

The controls felt quite awkward at first, as you control both the top and bottom halves of your mech separately, but for beginners, there is the option to control the mech as a whole. Other than that, it's your standard shooter but with a mech inspired twist.

What's more, come release, Heavy Gear Assault will also feature an episodic single player

story mode. The devs told me as Heavy Gear had such a huge backlog of literature, that they wanted to embrace this, and have therefore tweaked a well loved story in the Heavy Gear universe, something fresh but familiar. All of this paves the way for a hardcore relaunch of the series. Everything is going in the right direction and although the graphics and environments were a little flat, it's hard to look past the community Stompy Bot are building the foundations of.

Heavy Gear Assault is currently an Early Access title on Steam and is set for a full release on PC and Linux in 2016. ■
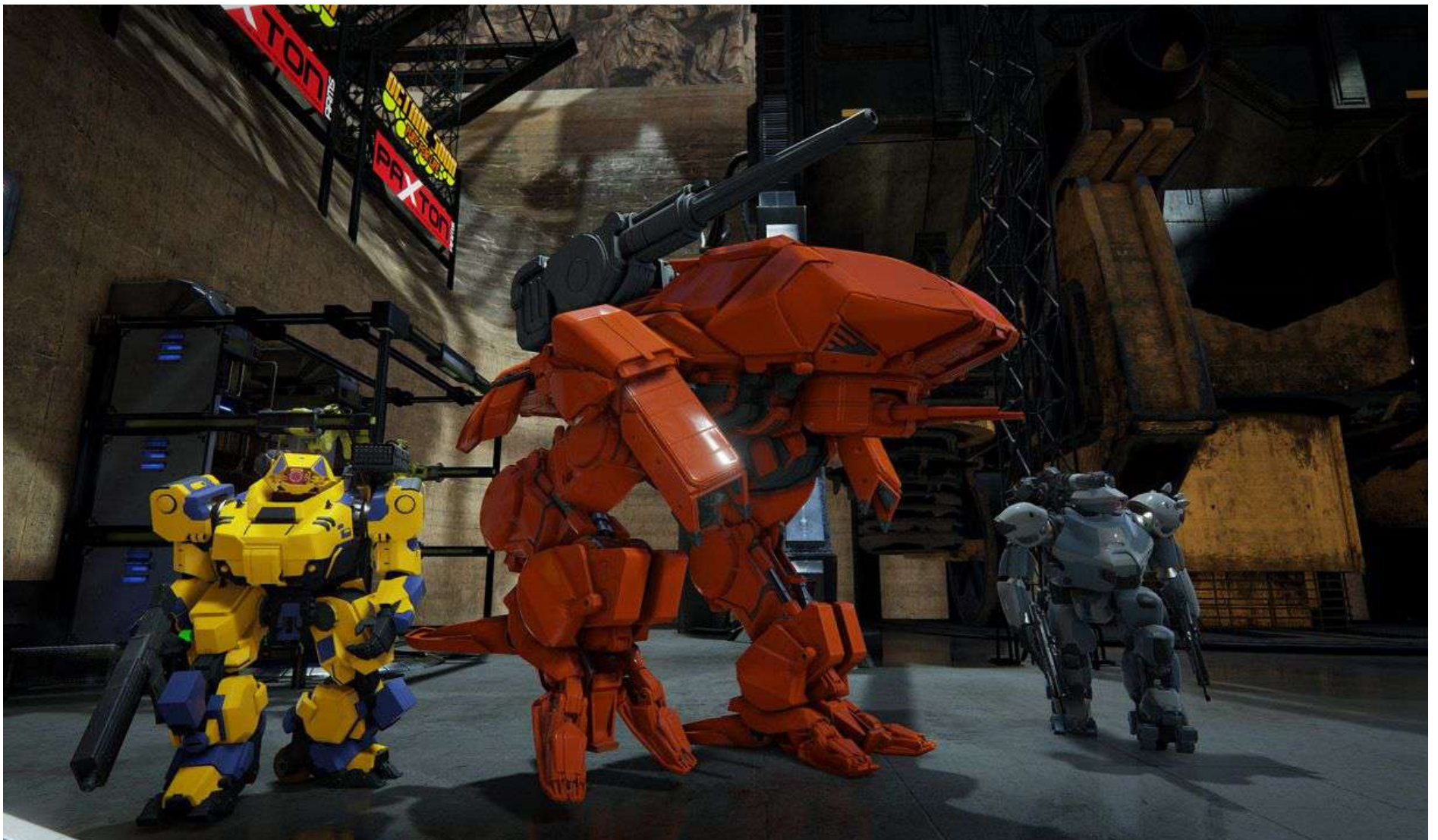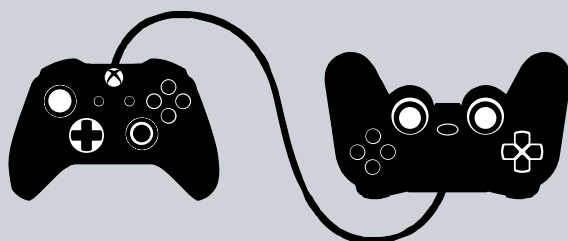
Hearts of Iron IV Updated gamescom Preview

Publisher: Paradox Interactive
Developer: Paradox Development Studio
Genre: Strategy
Platform: PC

Release Dates
TBA

By Ryan Davies

I t's been a whole year since my last update on Hearts of Iron IV, with 2014's gamescom providing my first in-person look at the latest WW2 grand strategy title from Paradox Development Studio. This year's show gave me a chance to see the game in action once again, and while not all that much has changed on the surface since that original viewing, it's clear that HOIIV is getting much closer to completion. Gamescom 2015 also gave me a chance to see some of the newer features of the game in much more depth. If you've yet to read much detail on the latest entry in the series, or fancy reminding yourself, then it's well worth checking
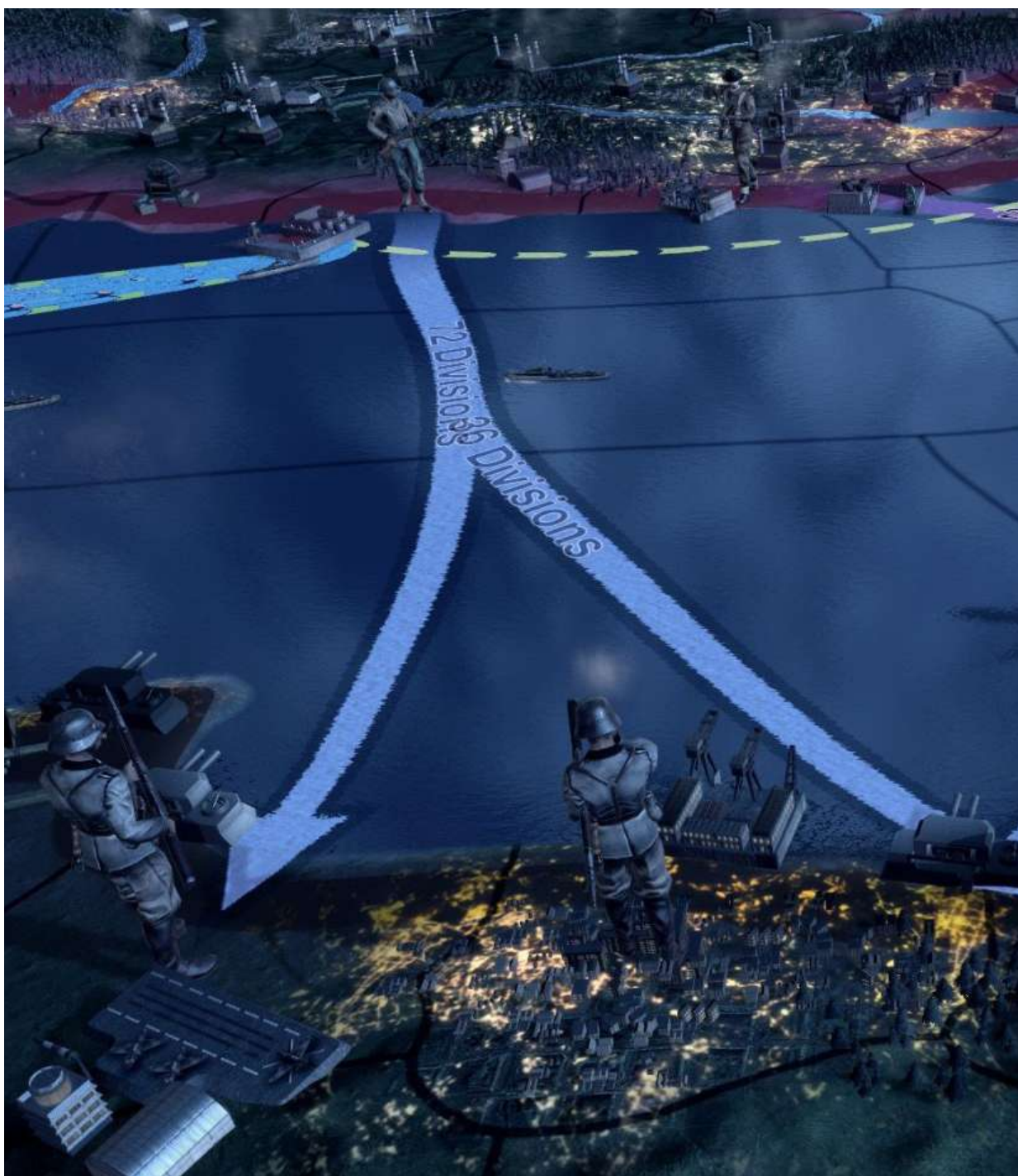
out my preview from last year first. If not, then allow me to take you through my single most enjoyable developer session at this year's show.

Hearts of Iron IV still presents itself extremely well on first sight. The Clausewitz engine, while entering its twilight years by now, puts in an incredible showing; the world map when both zoomed right in or out looks fantastic. The colours are so much more vibrant than in previous HoI games, and of course the detail in the terrain and unit sprites is far beyond anything we've seen from a Paradox grand strategy title. In the past, visuals haven't been an

especially important part of the game, but I can't help but feel as though the beautiful map will only help players to become immersed within the game world. Paradox grand strategy games have always been about letting the player's imagination run wild; exceptional visuals only help to make things more exciting and interesting.

I touched on a lot of the newer features in my last preview, but this time I got to see a couple of them in detail. Perhaps the most interesting is the national focus system that essentially works like a much deeper and more intricate version of the national missions mechanic from EUIV.

Once you have completed a certain set of parameters you can activate a national focus that will make a significant change to your nation. For instance, while playing as Germany you can turn the tide of history and become friendly enough with Poland that you sign an alliance with them pre-WW2. Or as France you could adapt your government and relationship with the USSR so far that you join Comintern, a move that will greatly change other nation's opinions of yours.

Each major nation in the game (perhaps even every single nation), has its own set of national focus choices that
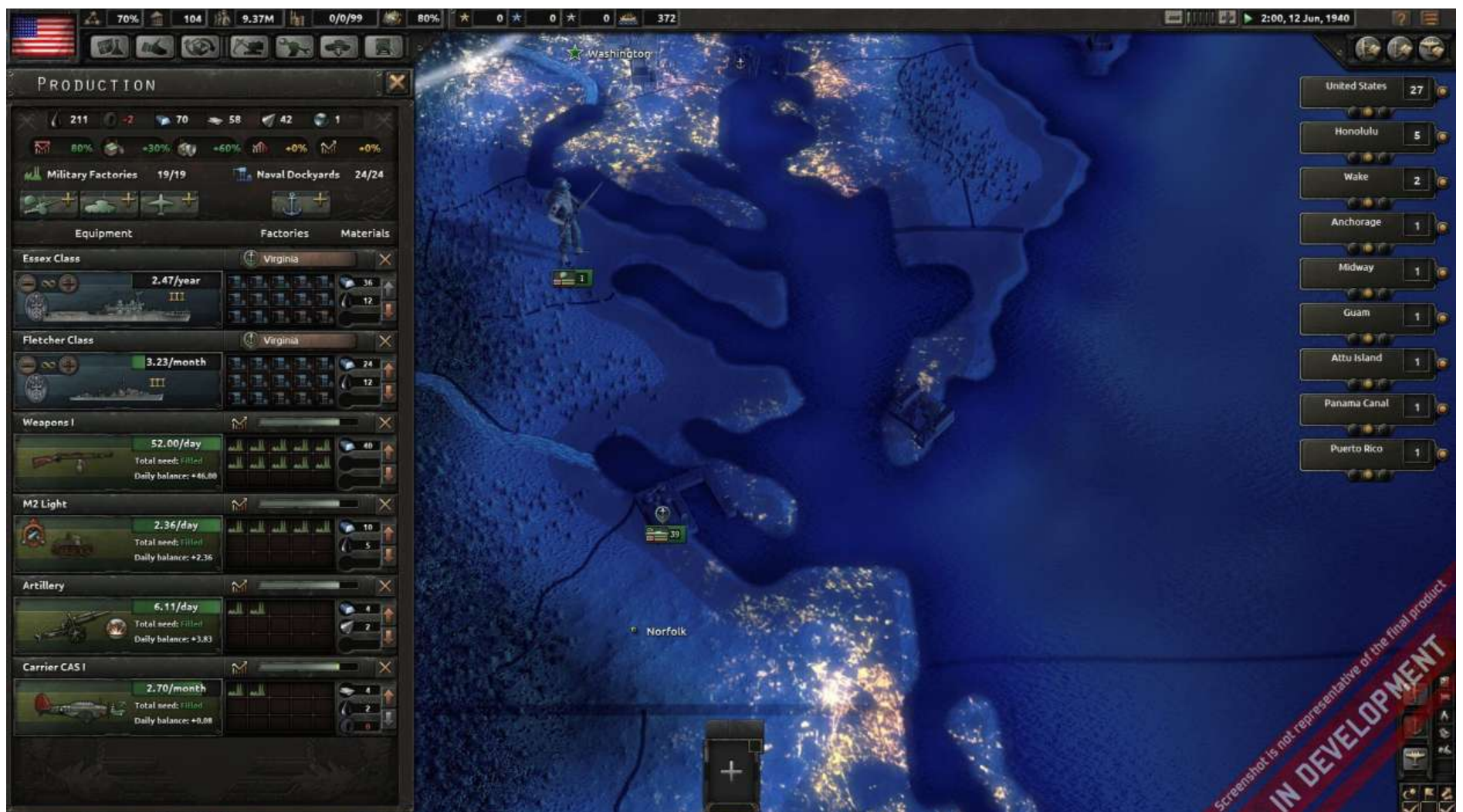
reflect both historical changes such as Anschluss or wacky history-warping scenarios like those aforementioned. Of course, it was possible to make unusual changes to your nation in previous games, but this new system should be a great way to give players specific goals during their play time. It's just another sign of increasing accessibility, yet accessibility that also gives veteran players new challenges and points of interest. I'm really excited by the possibilities of the national focus system, and certainly look forward to seeing the goals for each nation.

Another newer mechanic that I was pleased to be shown again was the doctrine tree that lets players decide on the style and tactics of their military. I've previously mentioned how the likes of mobile warfare, superior firepower and mass assault can be implemented by any country, but what I didn't realise at the time was just how deep these doctrine trees go. There are a lot of options, each of them allowing you to either use your troops in new ways or boost the fighting power of those forces. Seeing the doctrines, however, did give me my only reservation of the session as it seemed as though it would be foolish to force a nation down a doctrine tree that they didn't follow historically. Each nation starts with part of one tree already unlocked, relating to the doctrine they followed in reality. That's not to say it's impossible to change track, it just seems as though it would be harder to forge your own path.

Other little bits that stood out to me this time included the amazing level of detail in relation to individual unit statistics, and the ability to change them ever so slightly with ever-improving technology. Or there was also the neat General abilities system that sees your commanders

improve in specific areas of warfare. Stick a leader in Africa for a fair while and see them take the 'desert fox' moniker away from Rommel, or keep one commander in charge of airborne operations to see their paratrooping leadership improve. Oh, and the small mention of 32 player online was a nice little addition to the session!

One last thing I want to note before wrapping up this little pit-stop are the scenarios Paradox will launch with the game. Consistent with previous titles, players will be able to either start the game in 1936, allowing them time to prepare for war or change the course of history, or start right before WW2 in 1939. That's all well and good, but I can't help but feel as though there could be a lot more options. Not necessarily realistic time points later in the war, but rather fictional scenarios like Germany controlling all of Europe, or Japan never attacking the US. It's certainly something I'd love to see and jump into, and perhaps it's something that should be opened up to modders - afterall, Paradox has always had a close affinity with the modding scene.

When I pleadingly asked the devs for a release date, all I got in return was a tragically generic 'early next year' - the same info we were given at last year's Gamescom. Honestly, the game looks about ready to go right now, but I personally have a lot of faith in the Paradox team to deliver a great product at a time that suits them; a sensible decision, despite my selfish needs. Typically, I wouldn't write a preview like this in such a personal and direct fashion, but Hearts of Iron IV impressed me so much that it's difficult not to get a little over-the-top about it all. It's still my most-anticipated game, and based on the gameplay I was fortunate enough to see this time around, it could well be the best Paradox grand strategy game yet - and that sure is saying something.

Hopefully it won't be too long until we can get our hands on at least the beta version of the game. ∎

Action Henk gamescom Preview

Publisher: RageSquid
Developer: RageSquid
Genre: Racing
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One

By Luke Greenfield

gamescom

Action Henk is designed to be hard. That is something that is made evident from just watching how the game plays. The game is made to require a great amount patience and control. Whilst I lack all patience, it's lucky that these kind of games excite me anyway, so Action Henk was pretty appealing to me right from the get-go.

The story behind Action Henk is that an action figure (called Action Henk), that was once the top of his line and the best soldier around, is being challenged on his abilities years after his prime. Determined to defend his pride, the has-been hero springs into action for one more adventure to show he still has what it takes.

The game is a side-scroller platformer, much like Bit Trip. The main difference with Action Henk is that you control your movements, unlike Bit Trip,

where you constantly moved, only stopping if you hit an obstacle. This means you could take a brisk stroll through a lot of the start levels if a quicktime isn't what you're looking for.

But if getting medals and the best times possible is what you want, then you better get ready to jump, duck and slide to get there. The game is physics based; sliding whilst going down a slope will get you extra speed and jumping at the end of it will give you an extra boost. We were also shown some later levels in which a grappling hook is available, adding another challenge into the game.

When I was presented with the chance to play the game, I went through a few of the first levels to get to grips with the controls. After getting gold medals on all of them and even beating the record set by the developer on one, I may have gotten slightly cocky, attempting one of the final levels.

And I died about two seconds into the level.

Try as I might, I couldn't last more than a few seconds. A constant movement and momentum was needed, meaning stopping wasn't an option. The learning curve will allow for sequences like

the one I encountered to be done a lot easier; I did skip nine chapters to be fair.

If you're a fan of games that don't forgive easily, such as Super Meat Boy or Bit Trip, then Action Henk is one to certainly look out for. Even if you've never played that type of game before, the tutorial levels allow for a steady introduction to the mechanics of the game and don't heap everything upon you at once. This means that Action Henk a good title for both experienced and new players to the genre. Action Henk is already out on PC, and will be released on consoles later in the year. ∎
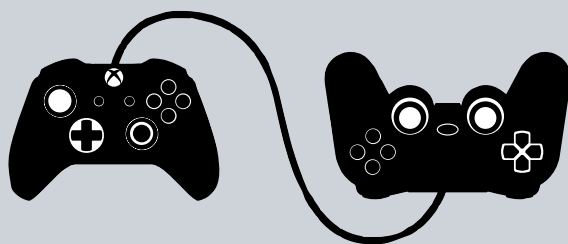
Oriental Empires gamescom Preview

Publisher: Iceberg Interactive
Developer: R.T. Smith and John Carline
Genre: Strategy
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Soon

By Ryan Davies

Eastern history, in particular Chinese history, is tragically ignored in western teaching. As such, most Westerners' exposure to that part of the world (aside, perhaps, from Japan) is minimal. How many Chinese emperors can you name? How many powerful families? Can you name any cities? Don't worry if you struggle, I know would. As someone who gathers far too many of his historical interests from videogames, Chinese history is something of a black hole in my mind purely because there are pretty much no games that actually explore the topic. Thankfully, Oriental Empires looks to change that. A smart gameplay presentation at this year's Gamescom took me from ignorant buffoon to fully-fledged fan; it's one of the most ambitious and impressive strategy games I've seen for a long time.

China, in particular the Three Kingdoms period, has consistently been one of the most requested time periods for kingpin strategy title Total War. The warring period is seen by many as an ideal setting for the diplomacy and warfare that accompanies such a game. With Oriental Empires however, the viewpoint isn't quite as constrained. Instead, players will see their faction

evolve through 3000 years of Chinese history from 1500 BCE to 1500 CE, an impressively huge time period bettered only by the likes of Civilization. I've mentioned both purposefully, because there are plenty of comparisons to be made between Oriental Empires and both Civ and Total War. I don't think I've ever described a game as a combination of those two outstanding titles, so the prospect alone is exciting.

The Civilization aspect is instantly recognisable to anyone who's played the perennial 4X game. The hex-based map of Ancient China is all very Civ, so too are the game's varying factions, diplomatic strategies and research trees. Of course, the unique Chinese flavour separates Oriental Empires from the distinction of a clone, and so too does a really impressive commitment to historical accuracy. Armies aren't recruited slowly over time, as in reality they're held in reserve and mass-deployed when your nation needs them. Or, to use another great example, the nobles and the peasants within your empire are handled separately. Appeasing one group may antagonise another, and if you push one group far then they alone will rise up in rebellion.

With all this talk of mass deployment and rebellions, it's hard not to notice that there are elements of Oriental Empires that are much more akin to Total War than Civilization. Considering several members of the development team once worked for The Creative Assembly, that's hardly surprising. As well as those relatively small differences previously mentioned, the closest relation to Total War is the amazing level of detail and zoom. From a wide-scale aerial view of Ancient China, the player can slowly pan the camera in until individual men can be seen ploughing the fields or preparing for battle.
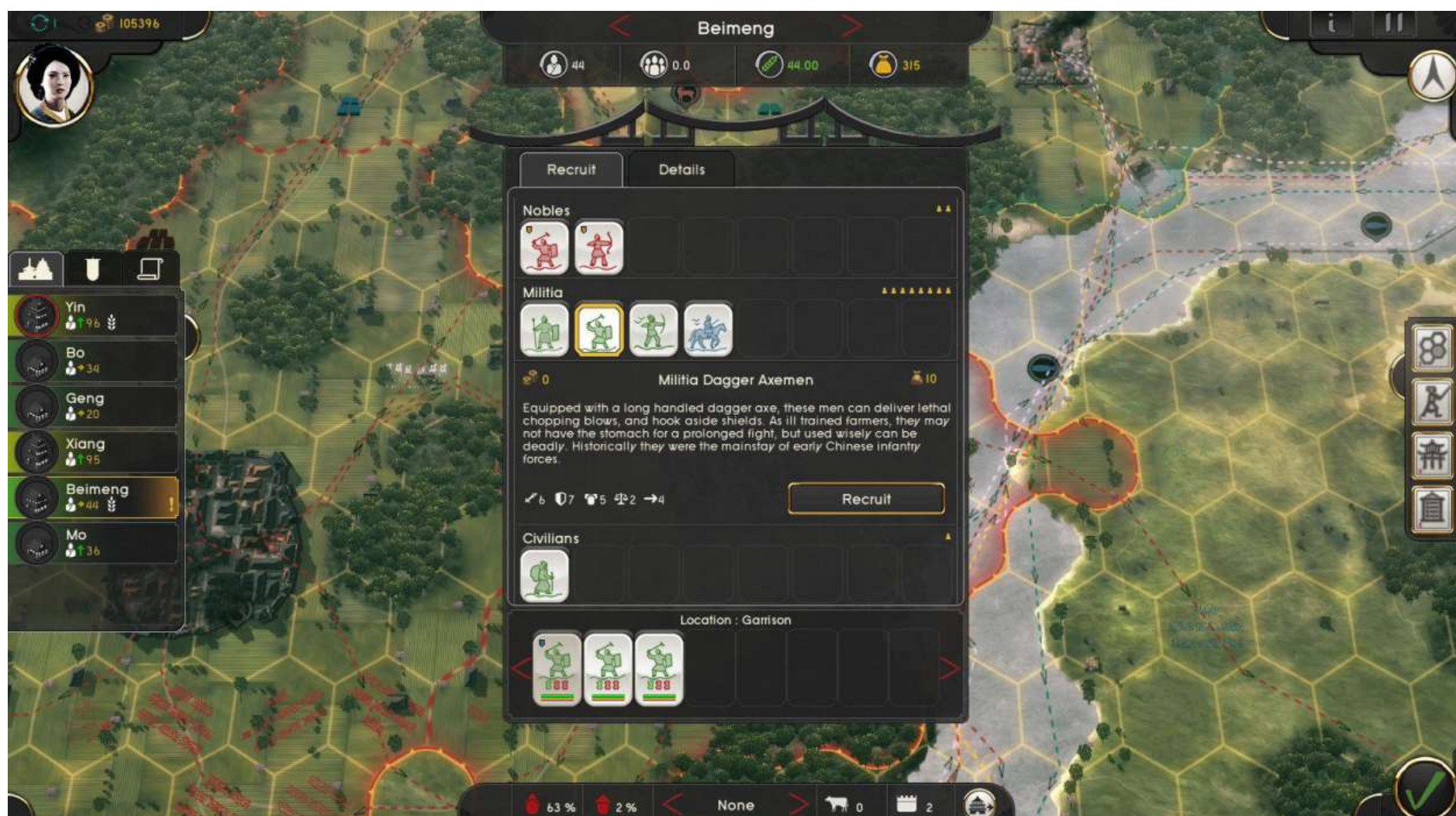
They're not like Civ's freakish giants either, but rather to-scale sprites that are usually a few hundred per army.

Even on paper that sounds awesome, but seeing it in real life is something else entirely. I was shown that impressive zoom level in such a nonchalant fashion I had to get the developer to take me through it again - I just couldn't believe that level of detail was possible on such a huge map. Total War obviously takes the cake in terms of pure volume of units on-screen at once, but those battles are completely separate from the games' large campaign maps. In Oriental Empires, it's all on one screen. I found

that to be hugely impressive, and while some may pass that off as a novel gimmick, I'd argue that features such as this are fantastic for becoming immersed in the game world. My issue with Civ is that it's just too historically random and not detailed enough to let your imagination run wild. Oriental Empires shouldn't have this problem at all.

It helps that the version of the game I saw had a really tidy UI that should be great for both long-term fans of the genre and people who are intrigued by the theme alone. All of the systems seemed to feed nicely into one another. For instance, the edicts mechanic works

alongside the technology tree system, allowing players to push their empire in a certain cultural direction. Plus, the technology includes interesting paths such as philosophy and religion, certainly creating a much more interesting development of both tech and ideas throughout your faction. With that huge time frame as well, there's sure to be a hell of a lot of cool things to unlock. That historical accuracy comes to the fore once again here too, as all of the edicts and upgrades are historically realistic events/developments.

The ways to win a game of Oriental Empires are similar to other games, although according to the developer

I spoke with (a really cool, humble, guy named Bob), the game will rely much more on your ability to handle vassals rather than pure military domination. There are parts of Oriental Empires that remind me of Paradox grand strategy games - the limit on owned provinces, for instance, or the focus on realistic game mechanics. If you've ever seen any of my Paradox grand strategy articles, you'll know that's not a link I make flippantly. Another element the game has in common with the like of EUIV or Crusader Kings II is hands-off battles. Now admittedly, the battles in Oriental Empires should be much more interesting to watch than in CKII, but they're still all about preparation rather than military tactics.

All you need to do is set your armies up, end your turn, and watch them collide with the enemy in pitched open battle or dramatic sieges. The version I saw seemed a little clunky, but I can certainly see the potential. Some may baulk at

the lack of control, but anyone who's played CKII and the like will know that it's a system that can be just as dramatic as the direct control of Total War. With Oriental Empires you can actually watch the

fight unfold too, and on that front it's once again very Total War. Considering all of these comparisons with other strategy titles, I wouldn't be surprised if you're worrying that Oriental Empires doesn't have a voice of its own. Fear not, from what I've seen so far, this could well be one of the best strategy titles ever produced from a small studio. It's looking deep, brilliantly tactical and incredibly beautiful.

Oriental Empires is due to enter Early Access before the end of the year, and I for one can't wait. ∎
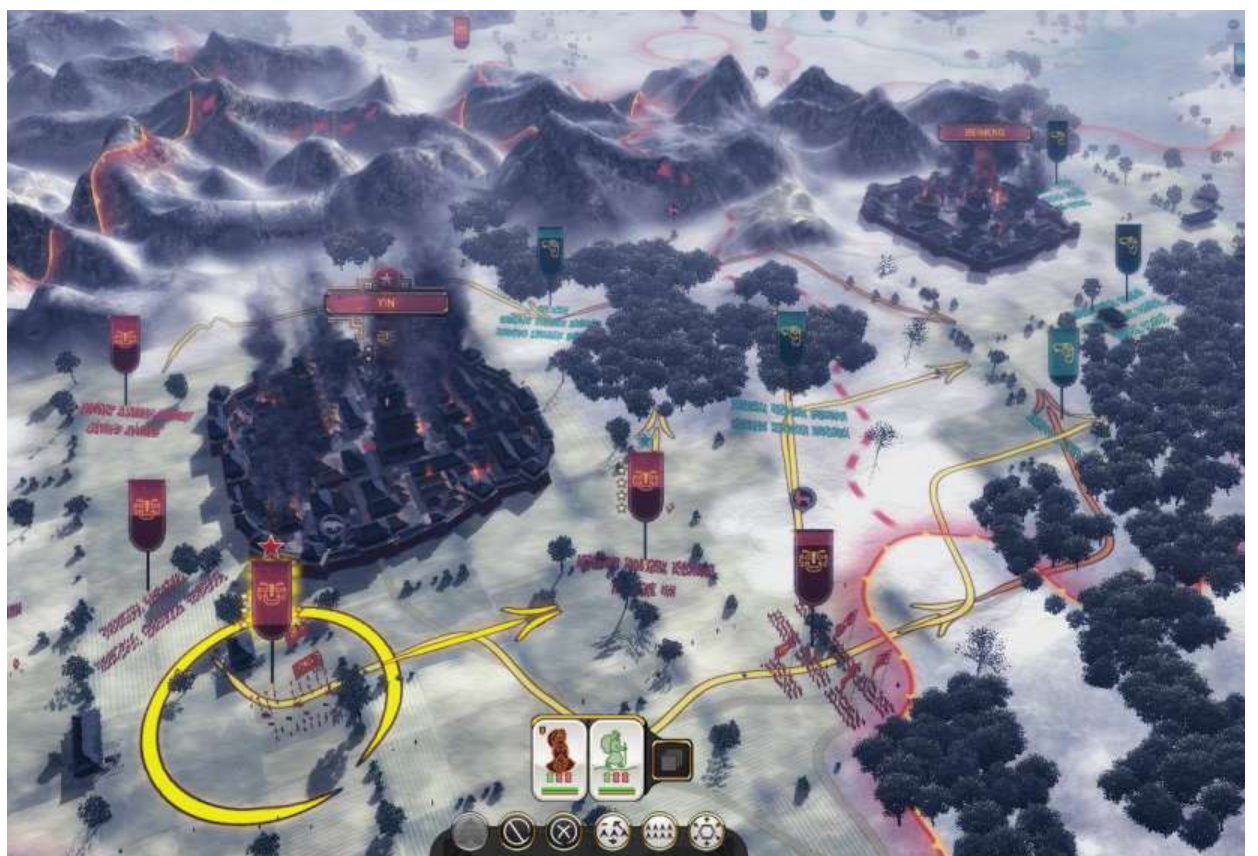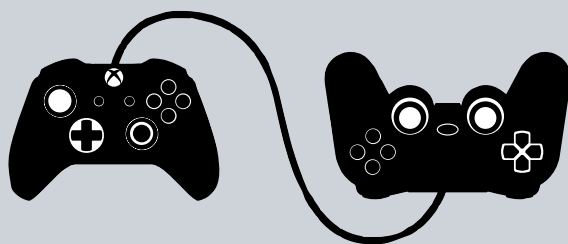
Paladins gamescom Preview

Publisher: Hi-Rez Studios
Developer: Hi-Rez Studios
Genre: MMO
Platform: PC

Release Dates
TBA

By Luke Greenfield

gamescom

Being press at gamescom has some perks, and one of these perks was the ability to play Paladins on the public floor without having to wait in the queue, and it was easily the best idea I had upon the public stands.

I got to watch the people previously playing the game finish their match before playing my own, allowing me to get a look at the different champions and the way they play. Something that came to my mind immediately was TF2, with the multiple champions, cartoony art style and capture point based gameplay. As MOBOs are Hi-Rez's

strongpoint (SMITE), there is an obvious influence of these sort of games, with special moves, mid-game upgrades (this time in the form of cards) and a very back-and-forth style of play

(presented with the lane system in SMITE), it's an interesting mix that seems to work well.

One of the main mechanics of Paladins is the card system. Cards are separated into three categories, Armour, Weapons and Abilities. As you capture points and get kills, you can level up and when you do, you get the choice of selecting one of these cards. These boosts can be faster movement speed, or improve your damage. Others could give the chance to slow down enemies you attack. If you die, and your cards are

active, they go on cooldown upon respawn. If they are on cooldown already when you die, they are off cooldown when you respawn. You can only hold 5 cards at once, and the higher level you are when selecting a card, the better its effect will be, capping at level 9. When you reach level 6, you replace your first card with a legendary. This then goes the same for 7 (boosting your second card), 8 (third card) and 9 (fourth card). This idea means you have to pick the right cards at the right times; picking a certain card at a certain point in the game could be the difference between winning and losing.

As I looked over the match that was playing before my own began, I was able to see some of the champions. There's an archer champion, with a very fast firing bow that was ideal for long range, but appeared to be effective at close range, made for dealing with single targets instead of a crowd. Another one I saw was a Goblin in a mech suit, called Ruckus (the Goblin) & Bolt (his mech). I took an instant liking to the character from what I saw of it, and out of the six champions, decided to go with him for my game. Ruckus & Bolt is the heavy hitting champion, designed to cause huge damage and clear the area for the other

champions to progress. With a high amount of health and a minigun for a weapon, I found his equipment ideal for my playstyle. His abilities included 'Dual Fire' which doubled up his miniguns for twice the damage, 'Emitter', which reduces damage you take, and 'Hover', which throws you up in the air and holds you there for a few seconds. You also move faster when doing this and can still attack and use other abilities.

Capture Points in Paladins work a bit different to other games. Instead of the capture-ness of the point being reset over time, they work on a percentage level, and once that's full, it releases

a Siege Engine, and that's when things get interesting. The Engine heads straight for the closest enemy gate, and this is the only way to take these out. The goal is to destroy all three points and escort the Siege Engine's to the Gates safely. Should a Siege Engine be destroyed, a new capture point will appear, and both teams have to fight to capture it.

Abilities are a major tactical point to the game, and if timed right, can often be used together for a devastating combination. In one specific scenario when I was playing, the enemy team had four players on a capture point and I was able to sneak behind, using my two abilities, Dual Fire and Emitter, was able to take on and kill the group in a 4v1. After this, I used Hover to get away before anyone else could get close to finish me, allowing the rest of my team to swarm the point and keep it under their control.

Overall, Paladins is looked to be one of the largest upcoming games and one of the most promising games I saw at gamescom. Coming from someone who could not get on with SMITE (or any MOBA, for that matter), Hi-Rez's upcoming title is looking to be a masterpiece in the making and I can't wait to see what else comes from it. I'm going to be keeping an eye on this one. ∎
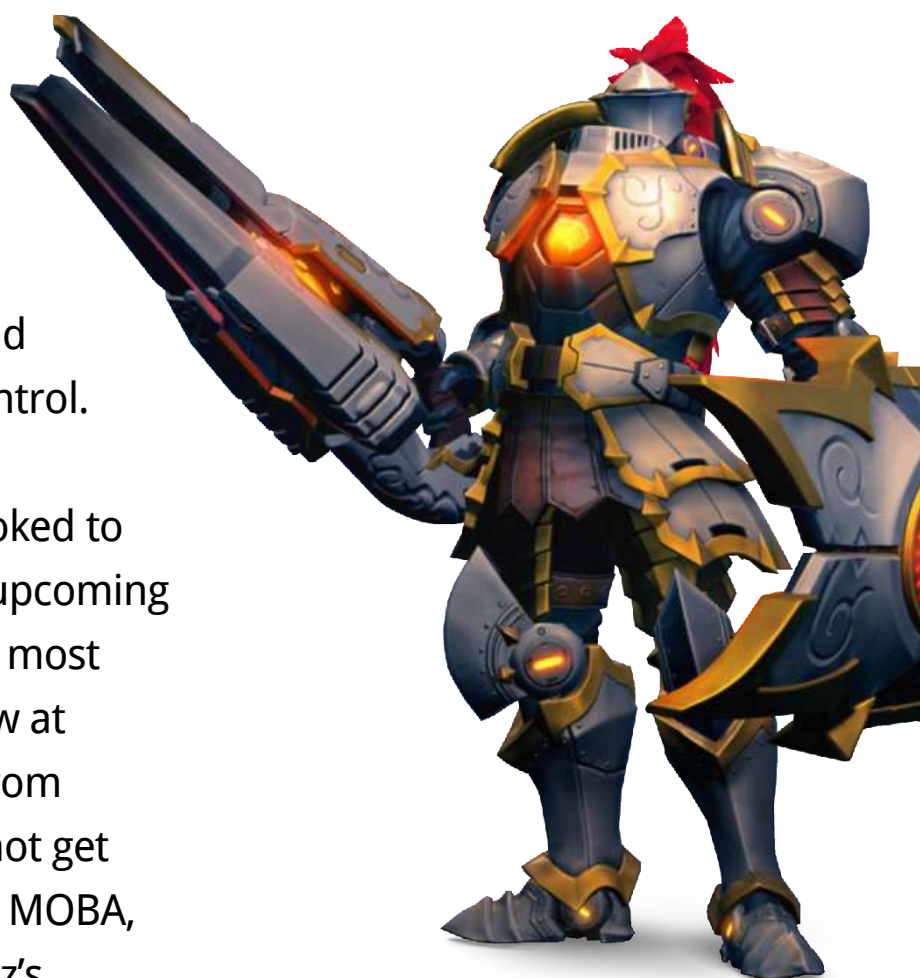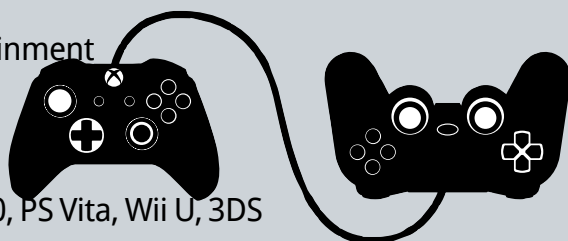
LEGO Marvel Avengers gamescom Preview

Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: Traveller's Tales
Genre: Action-Adventure
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PS Vita, Wii U, 3DS

Release Dates
26th January 2016 (North America)
29th January 2016 (Europe)

By Ruth Krabacher

The undeniable thing about LEGO games is that, like a toddler-friendly Call of Duty, if you've played one you've basically played them all. While not exactly slightly-more-HD reskins of previous installments, there is a definite sense of déjà vu in most LEGO series, and LEGO Marvel's Avengers is no different.

The quasi-sequel to LEGO Marvel Super Heroes (which dealt with a mishmash of the comic book Marvel universe and some of the cinematic one) Marvel Avengers as the name suggests instead draws predominantly from The Avengers, Avengers: Age of Ultron and some other unspecified Marvel movies. Players can relive some of the films' most iconic moments, and battles--this time in brick form. But beyond working with

Marvel Studios to use dialogue clips lifted directly from the films, most players would be forgiven for confusing it with the very similar looking LEGO Marvel Super Heroes.

In my hands-on demo of the Battle of New York from the first film, I found myself briefly wondering if I hadn't already played this in the previous game; it certainly felt like it at times. Level and puzzle design, down to the red white and blue sparkles indicating a switch for Captain America, felt nearly identical to its predecessor. So did the slightly-clunky character swapping system, and the geared-for-kids aiming feature for ranged attacks.

But that isn't to say TT Games, the title's developer, has been sitting on their hands as they casually reskin LEGO Marvel and copy in clips of Robert Downey Jr. spouting sarcastic one-liners. There are definite new features, although in my own short experience with the game they felt a little few and far between. Some characters have gotten new special abilities, like Black Widow's scanner that lets her find hand and footholds to climb between levels.

LEGO Marvel Avengers gamescom

Perhaps the most interesting thing is the introduction of special moves and combo attacks, which become possible after filling a ring around the character's portrait. In the developer demonstration, the mutant speedster Quicksilver performed a slow-motion takedown of about half a dozen goons and Black Widow somersaulted through the air firing at enemies. Characters can also perform these attacks as combos with each other for unique moves which change depending on which Avenger the player is controlling at the time.

Along with this were lots of smaller, less noticeable tweaks to combat, which TT Games told us came at the request of players who wanted more combat options. But the team had to balance it with the needs of their younger audience, they explained, who might not be interested in or able to grasp a complicated combat system. So things like the new combo attacks have been designed to work both ways: they can be purposefully triggered by more savvy fans, but younger (or more casual) players will simply stumble across them as a nice surprise.

LEGO Marvel Avengers is also unsurprisingly seeing a host of new characters from both the cinematic universe and the comic book one. Devs are promising fan favorites like Ms. Marvel, Scarlet Witch and Vision amongst the 100+ newbies. Stan Lee is also joining the ranks, this time as the Iron Stan, a Stan Lee-shaped Iron Man suit which turns into the Stanbuster.

In keeping with the game's heavy cinematic universe ties, the new free roam area for Marvel Avengers is the Barton Farm, which made its appearance in Age of Ultron as (spoiler alert) the home of

Hawkeye's secret family that he keeps hidden from S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers. After flying around as Iron Man, during the developers' presentation we got the lay of the land at Barton Farm, which looks like a surprisingly large map with more than a few things to fiddle around with between fighting the forces of evil.

Overall, LEGO Marvel Avengers came across as a fun new installment in LEGO's ever growing ranks of video games, even if it doesn't exactly reinvent the wheel. But as someone who's enjoyed all the LEGO games I've played as a bit of relaxed fun, Marvel Avengers is something I'm looking forward to and can easily see myself getting into.

And for the LEGO fanatics, Warner Bros. also revealed that certain pre-orders of LEGO Marvel Avengers would come with a real minifigure of the Mark 33 Iron Man suit.

LEGO Marvel Avengers is due out on 29 January 2016 for the EU, and 26 January in the US for PC and current gen consoles. ∎
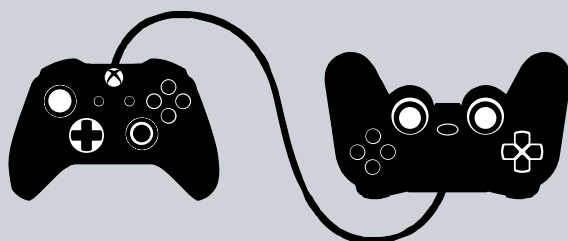
Destiny: The Taken King gamescom Preview

Publisher: Activision
Developer: Bungie
Genre: Action
Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360

Release Dates
15th September 2015

By Reece Armstrong

For all its successes, Destiny has proved to be a polarizing experience for many fans. The highly anticipated game released last year to both critical acclaim, and negative reactions. Destiny provided tight gameplay and an immersive setting, but lacked a strong story and incentive for replaying that didn't revolve around grinding.

Two expansions and a number of updates have been released for Destiny. These have made considerable improvements upon the game, offering a more diverse set of modes and a new social space that adds much needed variety. It's these, small, incremental updates that have added so much more to the game. Events give you a reason
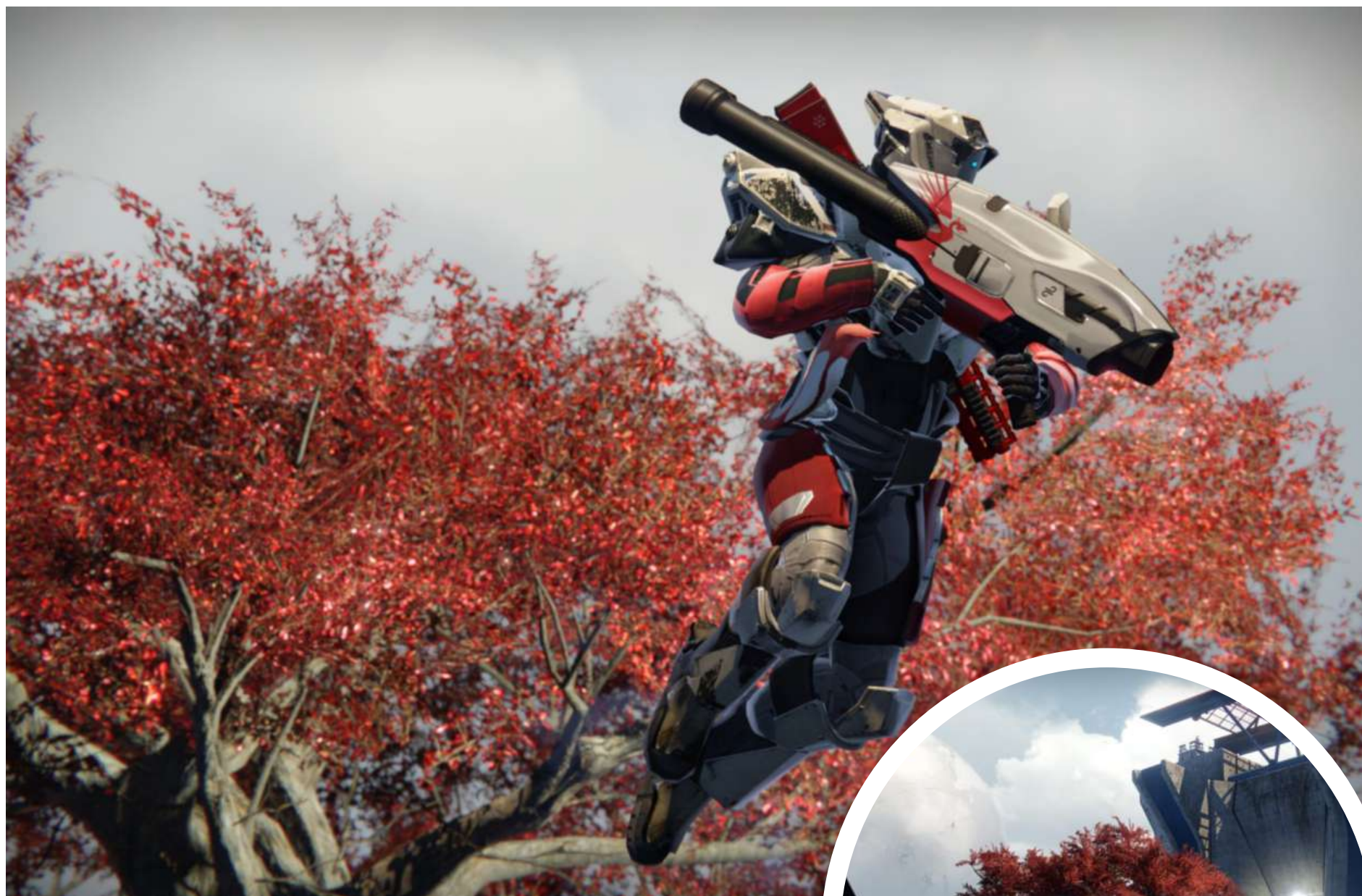
to play, and The Crucible, combined with The Iron Banner is now worthy of your time, offering better rewards. There is a host of content available to suit every player and Destiny is now, more so than at launch, a very good game.

The two expansions that have been previously released for Destiny, The Dark Below and House of Wolves, saw the game shaping up to become what many had expected it to be at launch. But it's the third expansion, The Taken King, which is set to launch on the

15th of September that looks to be the biggest and best one yet.

I was offered the chance to play the first campaign mission from The Taken King and right from the start I could see major improvements in the story telling. The Taken King is directly tied into the Crota's End Raid with Oryx, Crota's father being out for revenge against the Guardians who murdered his son. A cinematic trailer, the one revealed at E3, was shown to us before the hands on segment, detailing Oryx's space fleet

approaching, a tense set up for the upcoming expansion.

The mission I played was short but had enough atmosphere and cinematic design to feel much more engaging than many of the game's previous campaign levels. I got to choose from a Titan, Hunter or Warlock, each level 34 and equipped with
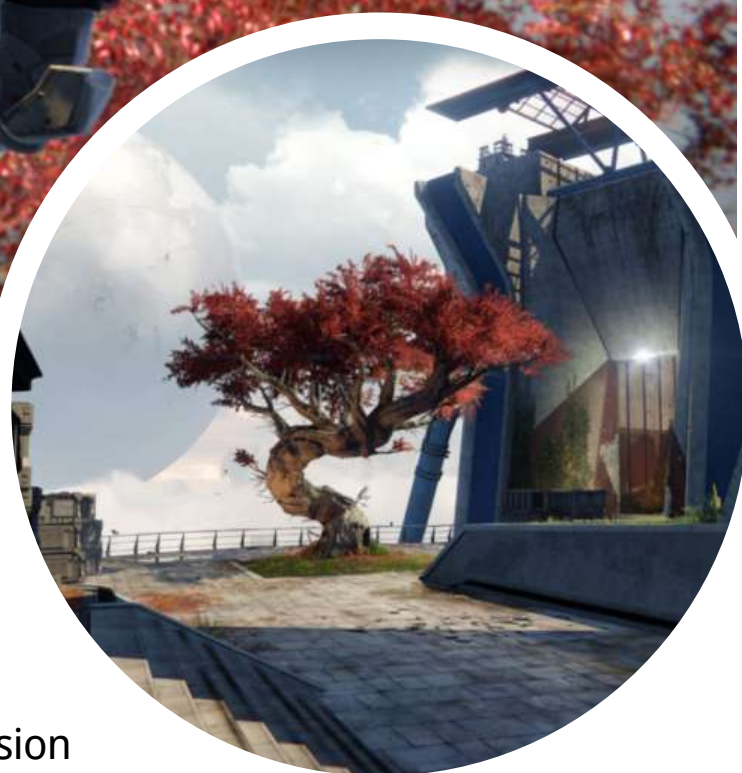
their new respective subclasses. I chose the Warlock as I was more familiar with the class.

I was tasked with surveying Oryx's dreadnought, which had appeared in the solar system, above Phobos, the moon of Mars and one of Destiny's new locations. Cliffs were all around me and not long after I had started my journey, when a Cabal ship flew into view, dominating the screen before flying off. Further on dead and dying Cabal soldiers littered the floor, one crawled to me for help, before slumping to the ground. These touches marked a noticeable change in the mission, and I felt more connected to the world than I had done in any other Destiny level. The House of Wolves improved upon the storytelling in the game, and The Taken King is bettering it.

Inside the dreadnought things didn't look much better. Strange pockets of interdimensional space were scattered throughout the ship, a device of Oryx's which allows him to drag enemies through. I finally encountered The Taken, but the enemies, who have been transformed into Oryx's minions, weren't all too different from other enemies. One of their abilities is to split themselves up, demanding you take them out before more spawn. The Warlock's new Stormcaller subclass has a super that sparks a chain of lightning from your hands, a very useful move for multiple enemies. At the end of the mission I got to see a ghostly visage of Oryx, demanding revenge for the death of his son.

The gameplay of the mission didn't deviate from what we've seen before in Destiny. Instead it focused on telling a cohesive tale, which sets up the remainder of the expansion. For arguably the first time Destiny may have a campaign in which the player feels invested in. A feature which woefully disappointed me on launch day.

Coupled with Year 2, which introduces a new levelling system, a friendlier U.I, easier ways to gain legendary and exotic gear and more, The Taken King adds to an already growing list of improvements. If you've been on the fence about Destiny, now may be the best time to invest yourself in it. ∎
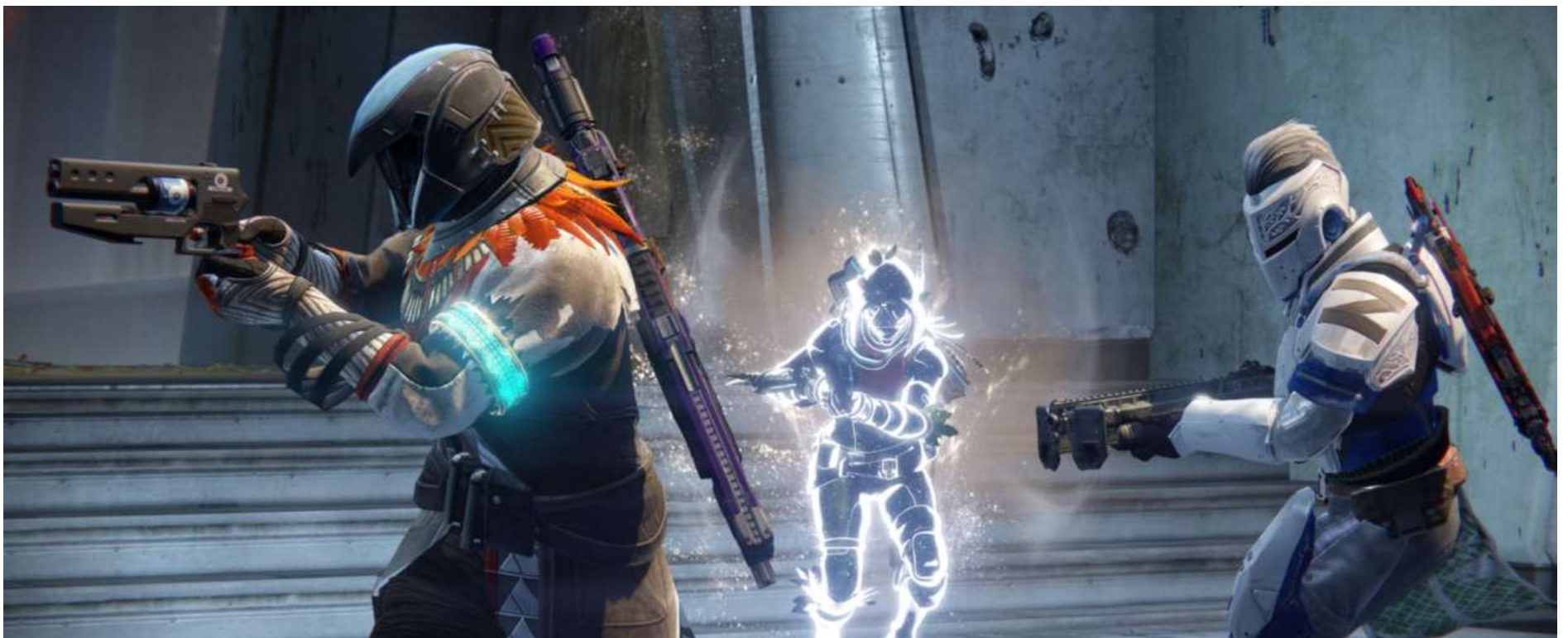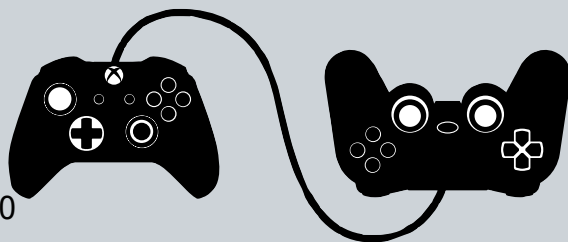
Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain gamescom Preview

Publisher: Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions
Genre: Action-Adventure
Platform: PC, PS4, PS3, Xbox One, Xbox 360

Release Dates
Out Now

By Ryan Davies
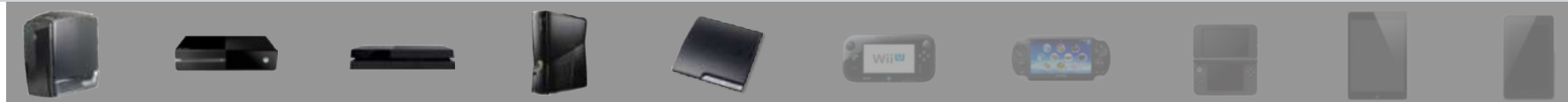
I don't think anyone would dispute that what we've been shown of the game has been pretty astounding. The game's incredible history meshing with modern game design looks to be a match made in gaming heaven (otherwise known as Hideo Kojima's brain). Plus, Ground Zeroes proved to be a fantastic taster of what we can expect from The Phantom Pain, and considering the impressive depth of that little game, we can only imagine how huge the full game will be.

Saying that, following this year's gamescom we're now much more clued in to the overall shape of the game. As well as

an excellent gameplay video demonstrating the Mother Base features of The Phantom Pain, I was also treated to a live demo of one of the game's pivotal story missions. It's well worth checking out the gamescom public video first though; I must confess that I was never a fan of the Mother Base mechanic in MGS: Peace Walker, but that was largely because it presented nothing but boring menu screens. This time around, everything is presented in-game, with each department receiving its own extended platform. The system also looks to be much more ingrained within the gameplay; it was easy enough to get through Peace Walker without paying much attention to your merc group, the Diamond Dogs look as though they'll require a lot more consideration.

Then there's the base invasion stuff that could be a really neat diversion from the central gameplay; a sort of mid-point between the single-player and Metal Gear Online. While it turns out that players won't be invading your actual Mother Base (but rather off-shoot Forward Operations Bases), I love the idea that holding
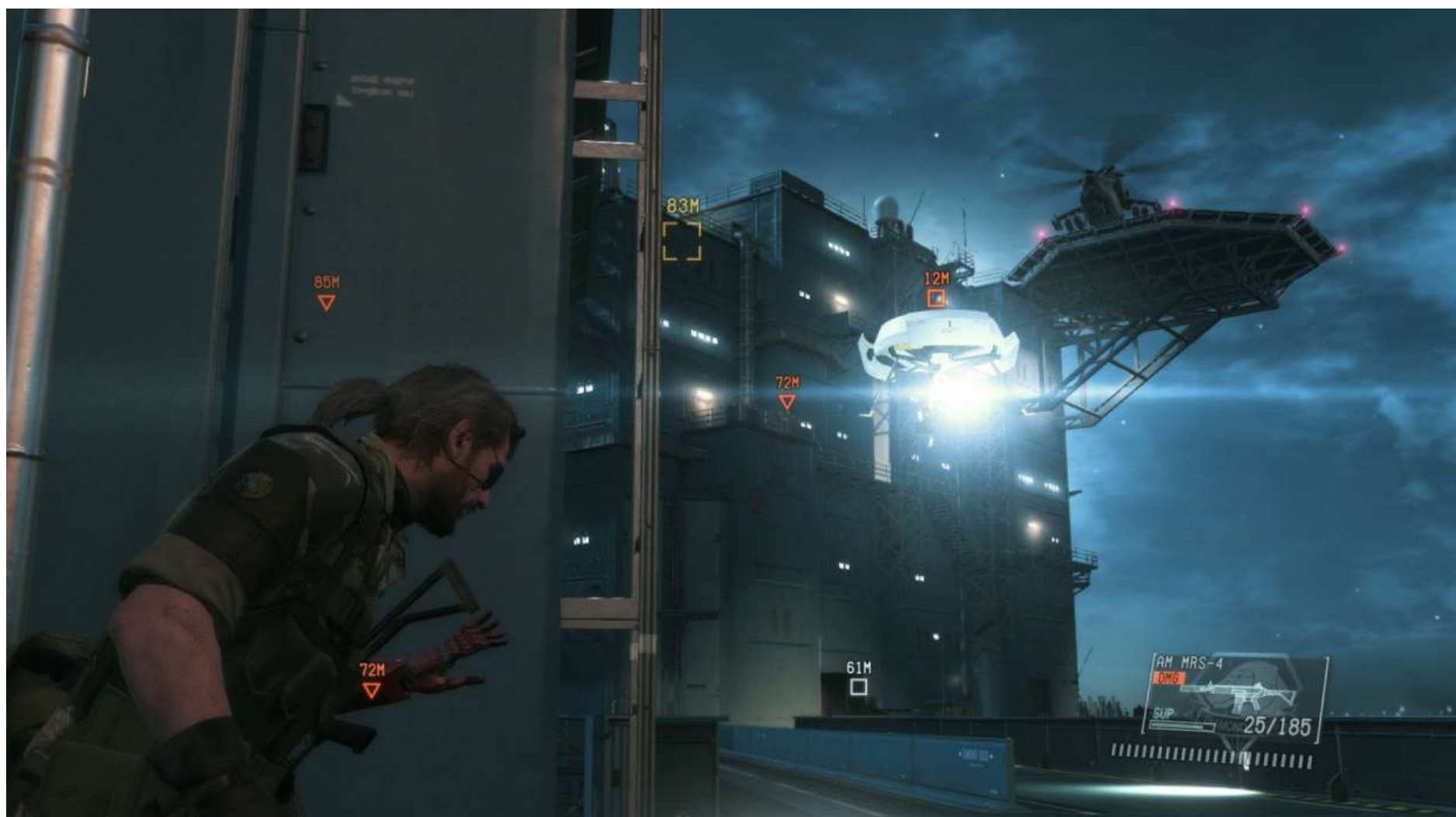
down an FOB comes with a degree of risk and reward. From your FOBs you can gain extra resources, but the payoff is the risk of constant attacks from other players. What's more, the incredibly extensive options for setting up FOB

defenses look fantastic; players can even set where their guards patrol. I'll admit to once being a little skeptical about the base invasion system, but so long as the rate at which people attack your FOBs is controlled, it could be a lot of fun.

As for the proper live gameplay demo I saw, it was mostly pretty standard MGSV stuff, the likes of which we've seen in publically available videos. The fact that it was played live, however, did allow me to see how the game reacted to the player making slightly unusual decisions or blatant mistakes. A rather amusing little moment saw the

player cock-up his very first shot with a tranq gun. He'd expertly placed D-Horse in the middle of a road in an effort to stop the truck the bad guy was driving from moving on, but instead of taking him out the guy missed completely, startling the driver and nearly killing D-Horse in the process. Funny little moments like this are bound to be what separates MGSV from other open-world titles, as they've long been a staple of the series.

The rest of the mission was indeed very familiar, although the new setting was interesting; a long winding road through a small valley that led directly to the enemy camp. The demo

really highlighted the game's stealth mechanics - thankfully relatively unchanged from Ground Zeroes. That winding road made it slightly difficult for the player to sneak past guards, but by using some classic diversion tactics he made pretty quick work of it. Probably on purpose, he decided to go loud for the final part of the demo, in which we were treated with a dramatic gunfight including rocket launchers, helicopters and a very scared horse. We were told that no matter how many times they demoed that one level, something different happened every time - and

while that's usually just a load of PR waffle, I couldn't help but believe them this time.

What's really incredible though is that through all of this, and all of the past information released, it still feels as though there's plenty of new content to discover once we finally get our hands on The Phantom Pain. We know very little about the story, and for an MGS fiend like me, that's an incredibly important aspect of the game. We also don't know all that much about the open-world and all of things we'll be able to discover in it. The reason I mention this is

because some people have noted that far too much of the game has been unveiled pre-release, and while I agree to a certain extent, I can't help but point to the unbelievable depth and breadth of previous games and know that The Phantom Pain will be no different. There's so much we don't know about, and I'm really looking forward to discovering it all for myself.

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain will be released 1st of September for PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360 and PC. It's nearly time for Big Boss to get bad. ■

Mad Max gamescom Preview

Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer: Avalanche Studios
Genre: Action
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One

Release Dates
Out Now

By Ruth Krabacher

"I Live! I Die! I Live Again!"

Aside from being the obligatory reference, it's not a bad description for the upcoming Mad Max game, which has been kicking around in idea form since at least 2008 before making the leap to current gen consoles and 2015 release.

At gamescom, I finally got the chance to get my hands on some sweet, sweet post-apocalyptic action.

Despite spending a fair bit of time in development purgatory, Mad Max does actually seem to have come out stronger for

it. The game, which isn't a tie-in to Fury Road by the way, gives fans a new adventure for Max Rockatansky who is looking for the legendary V8 engine Big Chief to use in his car, the Magnum Opus. Mad Max has clear ties to the cinematic universe, unsurprisingly. During the developers' demonstration, I caught a glimpse of several familiar places like The Citadel on the world map.

But Avalanche, the game's developers, have also added in a fair bit of their own new content; during my hands-on time with the game, I was in Pink Eye's territory, a new character created for the game. Max also gets help from Chumbucket, who repairs the Magnum Opus
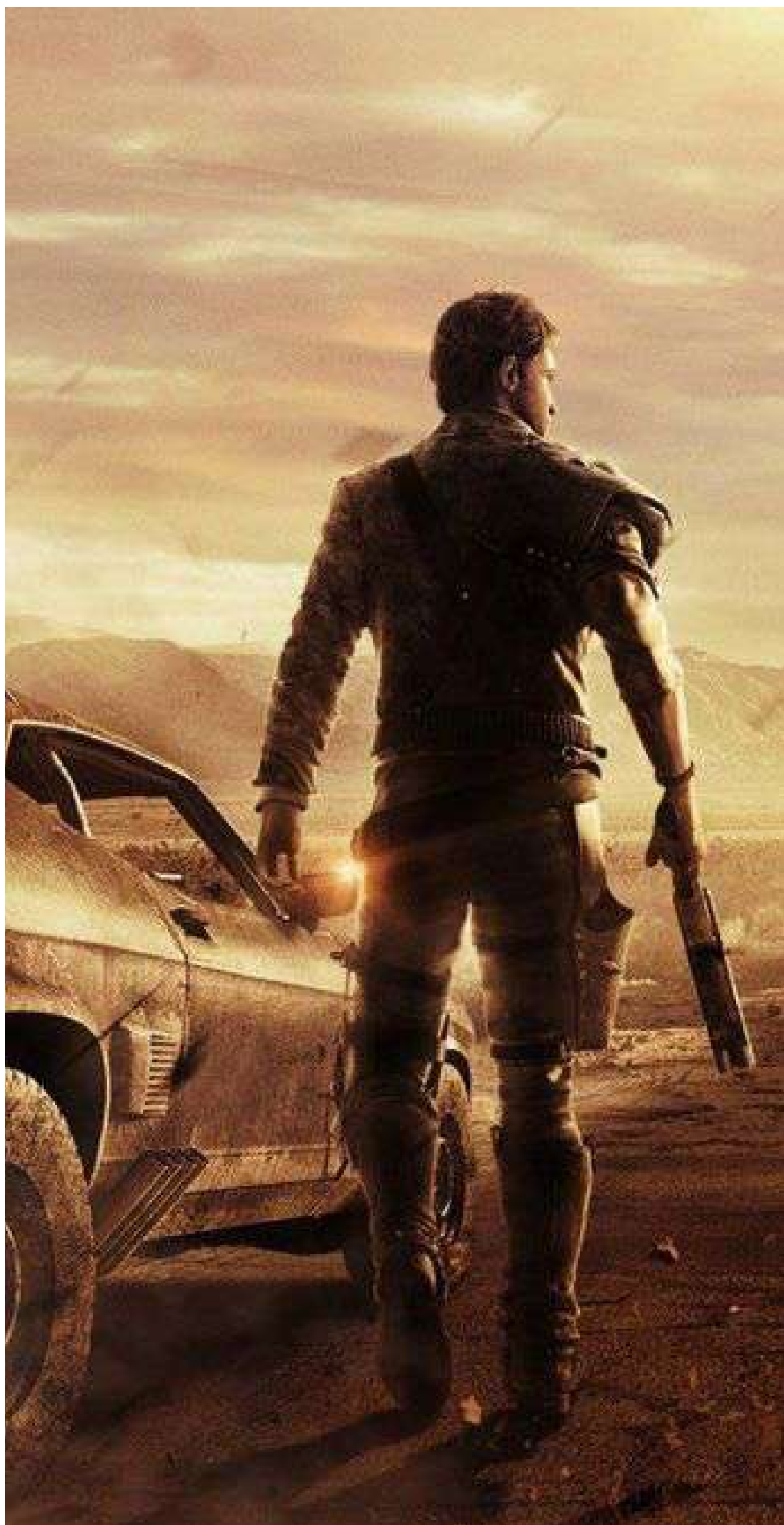
and generally helps to keep you from getting caught by a Gastown raiding party.

Unsurprisingly, driving and vehicular combat is a huge part of Mad Max. Avalanche has given players a huge range of customisation for the Magnum Opus: armor, tires, spikes, engines, paint jobs...the list goes on. This gives players a lot of room to make their car work for them, and as I worked my way through customising my own (with chrome skull decals, obviously), one of the devs walked me through some of the pros and cons of various options. Things like armor, for example, gave you more damage protection, but added more weight, which slowed you down and curbed your maneuverability.

Once my car was shiny and chrome and ready to kick ass, the real fun began. Mad Max is, in a word, fun. Aside from being able to ram and push other cars off the road, Max has three weapons at his disposal: the long-range thunderstick, the mid-range harpoon gun, and the short-range shotgun. Both the thunderstick and shotgun have limited ammo, however,

meaning I spent a fair bit of my time with the harpoon gun.

And, you know, ramming cars into each other.

But while only three weapons seemed pretty restrictive to me at first, it quickly became clear that combat in Mad Max rewards a little cleverness every now and then. Shooting out the wheels of an enemy's car, for example, could cause it to crash into another enemy. Or using my harpoon gun to pull down objects (or people off the backs of cars), could create just enough mayhem in a raiding party to gain the advantage.

The other thing I appreciated about Mad Max was the sense of weight to the vehicle; the gameplay lacked any of the "floaty" feeling people sometimes talk about with Just Cause 2, and it was easy to see how picking lighter armor might have made me more agile, for example. But this weight really shone when I got stuck in one of the game's dynamic weather events: a sandstorm.

The storms in Mad Max are truly impressive: in what felt like an instant, I went from a clear line of sight out to the horizon to the kind of visibility where you can't see three feet in front of you. Driving blind while heavy winds buffeted my car, I was suddenly glad I hadn't opted for a lighter build on my vehicle; avoiding the boulders and debris that seemed to come out of nowhere was already hard enough.

Mad Max features fully dynamic weather, including 'superstorms'--think the lightning sandstorm from Fury Road -- and it gives Avalanche's beautifully crafted map a stunning sense of location.

After getting a chance to see it in action, I for one am very excited to see Mad Max in all it's road warrior-y glory (last one, I promise) when it hits shelves and digital retailers.

Mad Max is out 4th September for the EU for PlayStation 4, Xbox One and PC. ∎
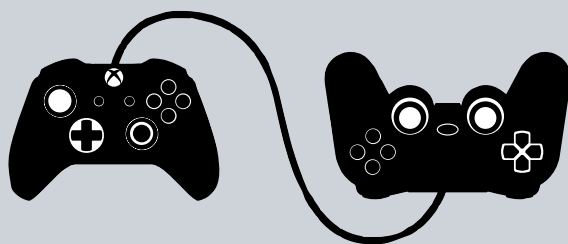
Total War: Arena Preview

Publisher: Sega
Developer: Creative Assembly
Genre: Strategy
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now (Steam Early Access)

By Ryan Davies

Despite the Total War series being a rather impressive 15 years old, the basic formula has barely changed over the course of its nine full games. The fantastic mix between turn-based campaign maps and real-time battles first introduced in Shogun: Total War is still the core principle behind Total War: Attila, and indeed the upcoming Warhammer iteration. Total War: Arena marks the first time a core PC title in the series has broken away from that traditional gameplay. Where all previous games have been deep and complex, Arena trades those out for a much leaner, fast-moving version of Total War that's quite unlike anything the series has produced before.

While games past are famous for granting players singular control of dozens of units, each
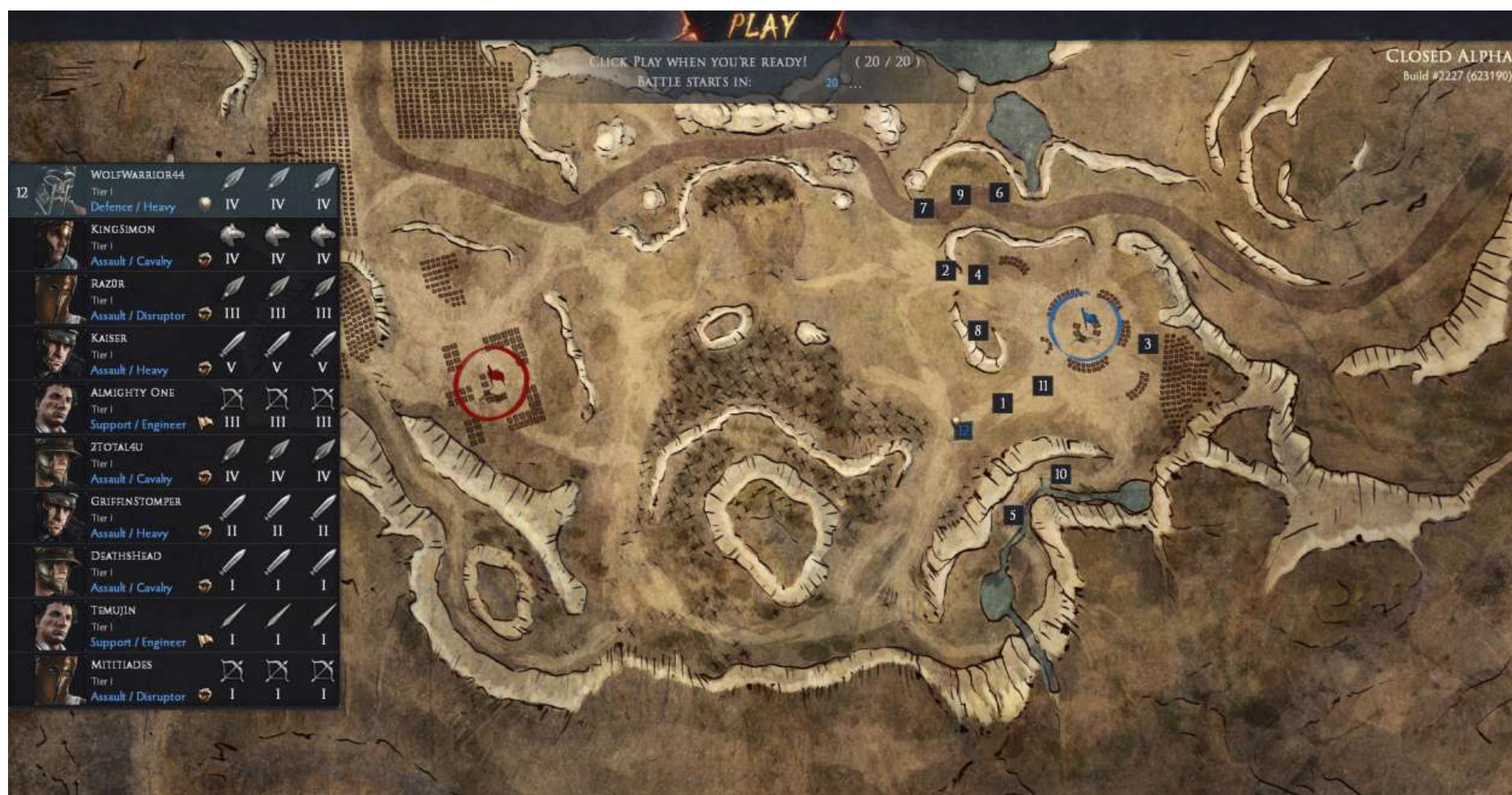
comprised of hundreds of little soldiers, Arena pars back the role of the individual in favour of a team-based game. 10v10 player battles, with each player controlling three separate units, are the core principal behind Arena. It's an unusual prospect for a strategy game, with the multiplayer battles in the Wargame series perhaps being the best point of reference, but it's especially unusual considering Total War's previous focus on the individual player both online and in the array of fantastic single player campaigns. While it may be a little odd, it certainly works well.

As a veteran Total War player, I was more than a little sceptical

of Arena, a feeling clearly shared by many other fans of the series. My initial impressions of the most recent alpha version of the game didn't help that mindset. Without a proper tutorial to speak of, things are a little daunting to begin with (admittedly that is in classic Total War fashion), and only get more complicated when you traipse through the long string of menus. Then, once you've figured those out, it's straight into a battle with a bunch of equally perplexed players in a game mode that, while simple, boggles the mind at first. Seeing so many troops across the battlefield that aren't under your control is a real pincher for those familiar with the series -

controlling only three units sure takes some getting used to.

Once that first game has passed, and you start to get a feel for how Arena operates both on the battlefield and as a free-to-play title, it's all upwards from there. The battles are simple affairs on paper, each team must take an enemy base at the other end of the battlefield while protecting their own. Those early games have a tendency to devolve into pure madness, but once you start playing alongside more experiences generals, strategy comes to the fore and teamwork becomes more prominent than it ever has in a Total War game. Being a small part in a large

battle is actually a fantastic feeling, and it didn't take all that long for my scepticism to turn into unadulterated admiration and addiction.

In the current alpha, you can choose to lead either Greek or Roman units under legendary leaders like Cesar, Alexander and Germanicus, with each leader having differing abilities and therefore specialties. You're then free to mix and match with your three units between the likes of infantry, archers, cavalry and others. At the moment, players tend to favour missile troops as they're in dire need of nerfing, but most games are usually pretty well balanced, with wins and loses coming as a result of good/poor teamwork rather than poor matchmaking. Of course, those accustomed to winning or losing based entirely on their own ability will have to adjust to the fact that losses can often be completely out of their control. What's arguably more important in Arena is how you performed individually - as that's how you're judged when receiving XP and other goodies.

Indeed, alongside the surprisingly fun battles is a robust and perfectly-formed free-to-play system that allows players to gradually improve their generals and units. Thankfully, most of the game is accessible through playing the battles, and even the rarer units that require gold (which will be purchasable with real money in the final game) can be accessed through hard graft. Special cosmetic changes to units will also be accessible with real money. Apart from those rather minor additions (and of course the ability to simply save time and effort), the whole game is easily playable and accessible without having

to pay a penny - and hopefully your enjoyment of the game will be the only thing encouraging you to spend money.

Upgrading units with the silver and XP earned in battle is a great idea, and slowly moving your little army up from a bunch of militia to hard-nosed legionaries is a thrill akin to the standard Total War games. Of course, the fact that you only have three units in battle means you'll probably spend a lot more time worrying about how they'll function individually. The fact that you can change between commanders also means you can work on different armies as you play.

The Greeks and Romans do function quite differently, so it's well worth trying both factions out. The Creative Assembly hasn't announced anything concerning more factions, but hopefully we'll see even more added as the game progresses.

Which is a key point that's well worth reiterating: Total War: Arena is still a work in progress - yet it's one of those Early Access games that'll keep you playing right up until the game is released. New maps are unveiled periodically, alongside constant bug fixes and gameplay changes. There are certainly plenty of improvements that need to

be made; for instance the UI in battles could be better organised, and the camera really needs to be able to zoom out much further than it currently does. Yet these issues are minor and not exactly numerous. Arena is a surprising success, at least in its current form. The idea of 10v10 Total War battles was somewhat horrific when first revealed, but this is clearly an idea The Creative Assembly has been toying with for a while. It really works, and fans of the series should definitely give it a try. Plus, given the streamlined gameplay and free nature, it could well draw many more eyes to the series at large. ∎

One Piece: Pirate Warriors 3 Preview

Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: Omega Force
Genre: Action-Adventure
Platform: PS4, PS Vita, PS3
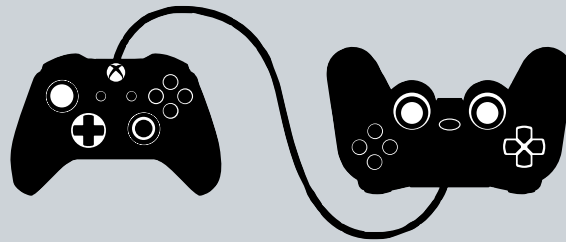
Release Dates
Out Now

By VodKaVK

For those devotees of Luffy & Co.'s mischievous enterprises, a new game about their show must sound like music to their ears. One Piece is a seemingly endless show, but it still brings fan in front of the TV 18 years after its original release. If there's anything that's characteristic about the show is the mix of dramatic moments with the permanent childish, cheesy and sarcastic tone of the characters, always with a garnish of graphic violence. Pirate Warriors 3 does not disappoint in this category. The charming and snappy one-liners that keep the show light-hearted, amidst screams and shudders of pain, are still present in the game, which follows — to great extent, through dreary text boxes — the story of the show.

Now, here at GameOn we've managed to play the first hour and a half of the game, and for those unacquainted with

satisfying they feel — make it easier to take down dozens of enemies at once, as all punches or sword slashes have a pretty big swinging range.

However, killing minions can become rather repetitive. In these games, it is more important to take care of the generals or commanders of the enemy army — bigger, stronger and more challenging enemies. They are scattered throughout the map and are the only enemies that present a real challenge. At points, it is better to ignore any other enemy and head straight to present Mr. Fist to these guys. Apart from them, other more boring objectives include picking weapons up from across the map, defending a territory or fighting another character, almost as powerful

the original show, we've found that Pirate Warriors 3 has a very unwelcoming exposition. One Piece has memorable and relatable characters, who are slowly introduced and built throughout the show. Pirate Warriors 3 seems to focus on the niche of people that know what the show is about, and how the events take place, as their introduction to them is overwhelmingly brief and cold, presented through plain text boxes taking the whole screen over a dull background. It feels brushed over with the intention to put the player in the middle of the action —and by action I mean punches.

The best way to describe the chore mechanics of this game is by referencing another better-known Namco game: Dynasty Warriors. Not only is One Piece:

Pirate Warriors 3 inspired on the title, but also on the main combat mechanics, which consist of an overpowered heroic character against hordes of minions. This third-person brawler has no problems with making you annihilate over four thousand enemies in a single level. In fact, all possible combos — not that many and not that different from each other, however cool and

as you, as an end-level boss. Sadly, every objective is ultimately carried in the same way, punching tons of people in the face, which as I've said, can become a little too much of the same thing over and over.

We've found Pirate Warriors 3 — in what we've played so far – a bit inconsistent with its objectives. From one level to the other, the way to approach the map was entirely different. It does give variety to the game, but it can be a bit confusing at points. The first level's objectives, played as Luffy, consisted in advancing through the level, taking out hundreds of enemies in order to progress — and saving Zoro. The next level was about taking and controlling territories, and then defending them against enemy reinforcements.

This one was more focused on being aware which areas were under attack and which ones you had to go to next, and so on. The management of the territories was more important than advancing in the level, since if you lost an area, more enemies would spawn. Keep an eye on the map!

On top of this, seemingly random events may appear in the map, giving you the chance to increase your score. This punctuation, however, feels pointless. We were able to spot glimpses of a poorly explained levelling up system, but as of the end of my playthrough — through the first few levels, that is —, this system hadn't affected me in the least. At first, I was drawn at points to chests, arguably 'hidden' in different parts of the level. However, I

soon realised how pointless that was. I was getting gold, health and experience, but none of it seemed to be determinant enough for me to keep looking for it. What's more, the level design was bizarrely uninviting to exploration: although there were chests here and there, it is never rewarding enough to look for them. Levels are reduced to big wide open spaces to brawl in, rather than interesting sceneries to play around. So, as I've said, the game's potential is somewhat squandered on a rather shallow combat system.

The perfectly executed art style, however, doesn't disappoint for a second. Draw distance, in terms of enemies, can become quite obtuse a times, with enemies popping up about ten metres away from your character. And yes, the enemies'

sprites may lack a bit of variety, at least within the same level, given that you're killing by the thousands. Nevertheless, the anime art style of the game, juxtaposed with the 3D environment, feels fresh and natural, which is difficult to achieve in comic-style games. Maybe it's also due to the familiarity of the characters, but even with the lack of meaningful exposition, characters still retain their distinct flavour.

From what we've seen so far Pirate Warriors 3 is a game that draws from several concepts that have been present in videogames for quite a long time. It uses the familiarity of the characters to achieve a smile on the consumer's face, but that's not necessarily bad. Fans of Dynasty Warriors will find this game easy to master and quite enjoyable, plus if you like One Piece, this game will bring you back to your childhood. It definitely made me reminisce of those mornings during the summer, when I got up with my brother at 7 am and sat in front of the TV, watching a plethora of Japanese shows.
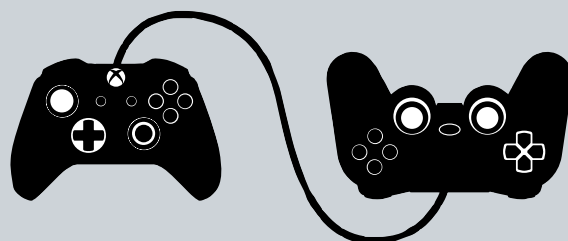
Sigh. ∎

Energy Hook Preview

Publisher: Happion Labs
Developer: Happion Labs
Genre: Action
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now (Steam Early Access)

By Andrew Duncan

Few games are remembered for their mechanics. Gears of War popularised the cover-based combat, for Minecraft its main mechanic kickstarted an entire genre and Spider-Man 2 was most well known for its web-swinging mechanic. This is a ham-fisted way of saying -- I loved the web swinging in Spider-Man 2. And if you ask anyone who has played that PS2/GameCube/Xbox classic as well as any other Spider-Man title, what that was missing, they will always answer 'decent web swinging'.

So when you have the guy who prototyped and oversaw the web-swinging physics for Spider-Man 2, go out and create a game of his own about swinging around, you can bet your spandex-covered arse that there are high hopes.

Energy Hook is more of a sandbox than anything, at least currently. Developer Happion Labs has been focussing on the gameplay, making it the best swinging simulator it can be, but has given it a basic plot. As an Energy Hook enthusiast (think base jumper or urban skateboarder), you go about performing tricks, doing time trials and basically swinging your little heart out.

Equipped with a basic jetpack and the titular hook comprised of energy, there are seven courses to play around in -- or there will be, some of these are still under construction. There are a bunch of challenge markers with races and trick attacks, but you don't have to do them and can just swing about the place, much like some versions of Tony Hawk. Each course is very distinct looking, and tell a tale of a world gone through some kind of cataclysm, judging by the desolation of some and the fact that the city of New Atlantis is half underwater.

Which brings me to one point that caused a lot of issues whilst I was getting used to it. Water is instant death, even if you're swinging and your foot barely grazes it. This is a disappointing way to die, especially as the only other way to die is by smashing into something solid. Whether it's a failed roll or you're swinging faster than a human has any right to and smash face-first into a wall, don't let the lack of enemies fool you into thinking you're safe: because you will mess up and die.

There are some challenges that Energy Hook must overcome before it goes on sale. The most obvious first: the character design is very basic. This is down to budgetary restraints (and graphics are definitely not everything) but it does stand out against the very well designed courses, some of which were created by third parties. The ground controls are currently either very sluggish, or incredibly twitchy -- and which one is usually the opposite of what you want, resulting in me drowning several times. Both the hook and jetpack upgrade automatically as you complete challenges, but it could be made clearer when and what was going to happen.

There is definitely work to be done on Energy Hook. But that's exactly why Early Access titles are in Early Access; for the community to say how they want things to change and improve. As it is, the game has some bugs and isn't finished but is a fun, challenging sandbox. Set your own targets or participate in the leaderboards, it's up to you how you play, and if this sounds fun for you, I highly recommend you do play it. ∎
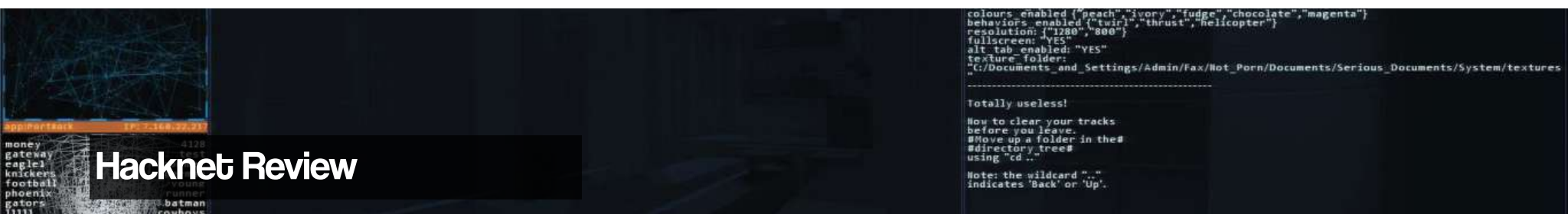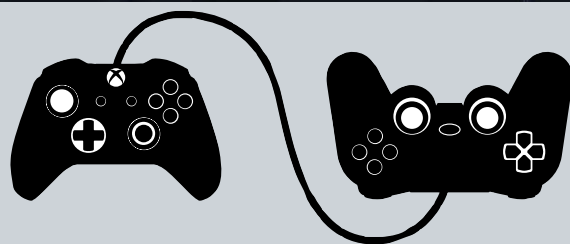
Hacknet Review

Publisher: Surprise Attack
Developer: Team Fractal Alligator
Genre: Simulation
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Ben McCurry

H acking won't make for a good game. What's interesting about hacking in the confines of a video game?" If Uplink was a strong argument for hacking as a video game, the Hacknet beta was enough to convince. Pulse-pounding and more tense than the relationship between India and Pakistan, it turned out to be an impressive and overwhelming performance. However, that was then. Now, we have the full-fat game on our hands. The devs are finished and the game is ready for release. I now wonder: can the game hack it, or will the new features be a case of system overload?

You play as yourself, an aspiring hacker using the HackNetOS, an operating system designed to make hacking a breeze. One day, you get a message from
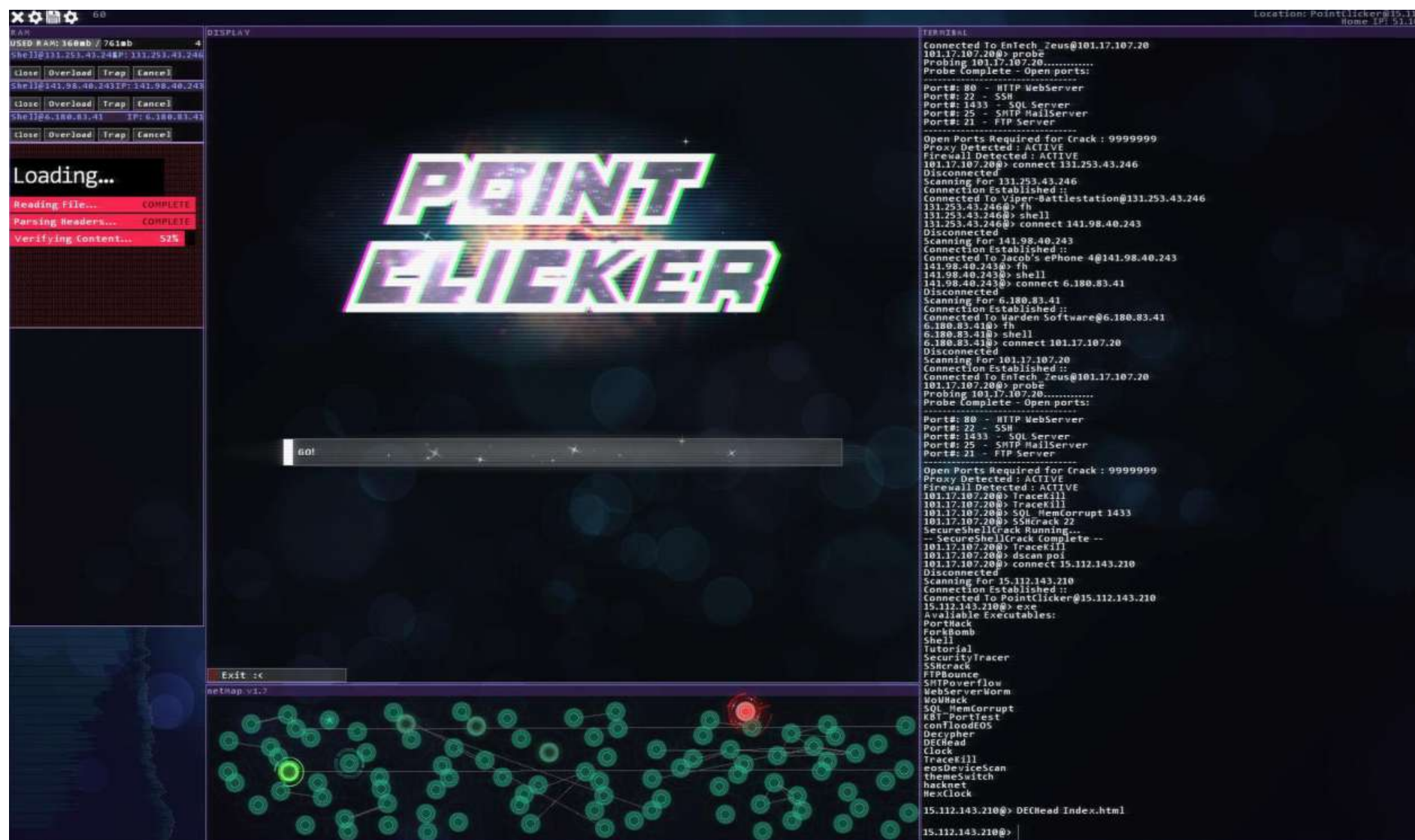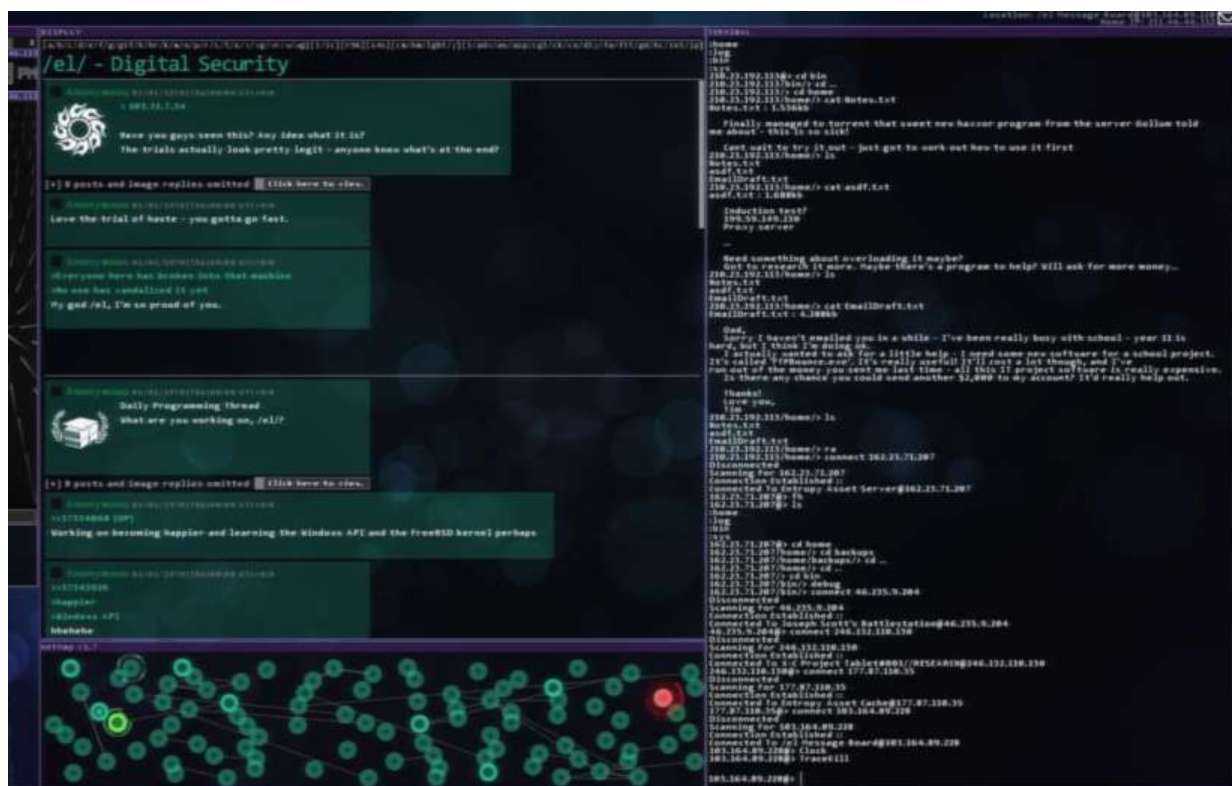
Bit, a fellow hacker who is implied to have met a murky end, and not via accident as it's claimed to be. To find them, you must follow the trail of breadcrumbs left behind by Bit, who sets you on course in your hacking career. At first, they test your mettle with some easy jobs – hacking a friend's computer for an important .exe, for example. However, your skill and reputation grows; hacking collectives will be at your door, inviting you in for more high-scale and dangerous missions – hacking a KFC knockoff's servers to find out the 11 secret herbs and spices is a stand-out. This creates a clear sense of progression – the game becomes addictive not just from the hacking gameplay, but also the idea of becoming the best and getting into

even more cut-throat circles to prove what you can do.

The word 'addictive' is not used lightly, either – do not play this game if you've only got ten minutes or you're looking for a good night's sleep. One mission will slowly melt into ten, and before you know it, when you're trying to hack into some high profile system, it's dark outside. Again, though, this is a game about hacking. Why?

Hacknet is genuinely thrilling and excites harder than a million Call of Duty or Assassin's Creed titles ever could. This is in no small part due to the actual gameplay. You gain access to computers and servers by entering commands into a terminal – rm to delete, ls to display files, and porthack. exe to deploy a program that grants you entry to computers, for example. While this sounds as basic as games can get (it might strike some as a dolled-up text adventure), where it really shines is the thrill and exhilaration of hacking itself. The game feels naughty, taboo, even dangerous, and that's guaranteed to make your hairs stand. The immersion of this game is amazing; the addictive aspect couples with this, and you soon forget that what's in front of you is a piece of

fiction – you're in Hacknet's world now. Couple this with the fact that hacking into some systems trigger alarms, making the hacking process a race against time, and you'll have weapons-grade adrenaline coursing through your veins. This is, of course, a videogame rooted in fiction, but the feeling of doing something illicit and illegal is present, and will make your heart pound. That's exactly why this game succeeds so hugely, for what it is: it's a complete rush.

How it stays so exciting is intrinsically linked to the cool presentation of the game. Playing the game is like living in the Matrix in that the graphics are minimalist, juxtaposing blacks and greys with bright neon colours, creating the strong feeling of illicitness and danger that Hacknet thrives on. This is supported by the soundtrack, which is mostly ambient dance music reminiscent of Aphex Twin's earlier work (think Selected Ambient Works 85-92) coupled with more high octane tracks for the time attack sections, which works wonders to the tense atmosphere.

Hacknet also seems like it will include some of the most interesting and captivating moments in games this year.

Without giving too much away, the game has an incredible moment where a revenge job on a black hat hacker goes awry. They find out, and threats are fired at you. Standard stuff, but before you can finish rolling your eyes, the infamous blue screen of death flashes up filling your screen, and there is a genuine moment of panic when you think, "Oh, bloody hell, what happened to my computer?". Thankfully, it's just the game screwing with you, Sons of Liberty-style, but it demonstrates again just how good Hacknet is at taking you out of your comfort zone. This starts a genuinely challenging segment where the hacker

makes good on their threats, leaving your computer a simple DOS terminal, removing any visual parts of the computer, testing how good you really are at using the commands, or if you were paying attention before. Indeed, Hacknet looks to be one of the most clever and thoughtful titles of the year.

Sadly, though, the game has its share of tiny annoyances that put a dampener on the rest of the game. The game features a Cookie Clicker clone that looked great in the beta version, but sadly doesn't work yet in the real game (at least for me) – the game's server is hackable, but any attempt to access the game proper is rebuffed. The game is chock full of different files that need not be accessed in a normal run of the game,

being thrown in as comedy extras – such as humorous faux-IRC logs referencing assorted Internet memes and in-jokes. However, some can't be clicked at all without causing the game to hang, requiring a soft reset that completely takes you out of the game. Most egregious of all is the timer/countdown mechanic that triggers when you go snooping in high-security servers. If you fail to beat the clock, you get a fake blue screen and a reboot, but simply disconnecting from the server at hand will cause the timer to reset when you re-enter, all while your progress

stays the same – one can potentially just abuse the "dc" command to breeze through the timer sections which should have been more climactic.

Make no mistake, though – foibles aside, Hacknet is as slick, clever, and unbearably, maddeningly exciting as games that cost four times as much. Drop all preconceived notions about hacking being boring or unsuitable in a gaming context, and let yourself be immersed in this wonderful title. Send the message to Ubisoft: when it comes to hacking, Watch_Dogs isn't the big dog, Hacknet is.∎

Hacknet

9.5/10
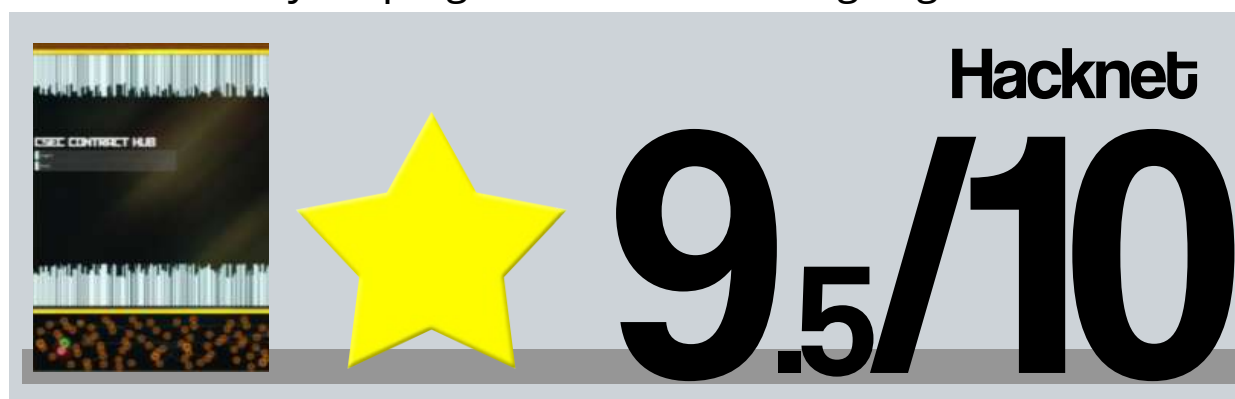
Reviews

Giana Sisters: Dream Runners Review

Publisher: EuroVideo Medien
Developer: Black Forest Games
Genre: Racing
Platform: PC

By Dom D'Angelillo

The Giana Sisters, unbeknownst to me, has a legacy stretching back to the 1980s and the days of big hair, synth music and 2D platformers. And that is exactly what it was, a platforming game often compared in style to Super Mario Bros. Fast forward to 2015, and following a successful KickStarter back in 2012 for Twisted Dreams, the series has once again returned, this time with a new approach. Unlike the platformers that have come before it, Giana Sisters: Dream Runners is a platform racer.

With a focus on multiplayer, the premise for Giana Sisters: Dream Runners is simple. You take control of one of four racers and must keep running, navigating around platforms and obstacles until somebody wins. The winner is declared by either being in the lead at the end of the timer, or by stretching out such an advantage to the extent of knocking your opponents off screen. Across the nine levels are the usual trope of boosts, obstacles and enemies to help or hinder your race; bricks falling from crumbling walls can quickly change a one-sided race into an even battle for glory.

It's easy to see the influences on Giana Sisters: Dream Runners.

Elements from the likes of Mario Kart, Micro Machines, Fusion Frenzy and even LittleBigPlanet are all apparent and that's no discredit to Black Forest, who have chosen an excellent selection of loved titles to paint the Giana Sisters' canvas with. But its variety is also Dream Runners' downfall; it's very much a jack of all trades, master of none. Elements of speed running and platforming all feel so watered down that it's difficult to grasp which

genre it truly fits into. There's nothing truly unique about the gameplay, so much so that it's an easily forgotten game once you've put the controller down and turned off the console.

You have to take your hat off to Black Forest though, there is no tutorial per se and lets you crack on with a game from the get go. Other than a few 'tips and pointers' during your initial race, it's pretty much trial and error. Again though, it feels like a more detailed intro to the controls would allow for new players to familiarise themselves with a genre that's relatively hard to master. It's a bold move, but one that is rarely well received.

Black Forest's focus on multiplayer is where Giana Sisters: Dream Runners gameplay shines through. It seems the days of local co-

op are having something of a renaissance, and the fast-paced race for supremacy that is Dream Runners encourages these multiplayer sessions on the sofa, jostling for victory. While you can play single player, the remaining racers controlled by AI, the drama is barely comparable to that of multiplayer. Playing online is also an option, but I found that the wait for opponents and lack of physical competition made online racing just a more difficult version of single player.

Giana Sisters: Dream Runners has a beautifully designed art style which again, echoes

the games which were clearly a huge inspiration to Black Forest has used. The playable characters all feature a distinct, eye-popping colour and are easily recognisable on what can often be a chaotic and wide-angle screen. And when you're racing for survival with the edge biting at your backside, the bright colours are essential.

All in all, Giana Sisters: Dream Runners is a very average game, but is ramped up and much more enjoyable when playing together with friends. The 'run for your life' mentality of the game means that races, while rarely one-sided, are tense and enjoyable regardless of the outcome. It does fall short a peg or two, without really fully offering a solid version of a runner or a platformer, the two barely propping each other up as a solid genre. It might not be entirely innovative, but if you're looking for a new party game to entertain your friends, you're in the right place. ∎
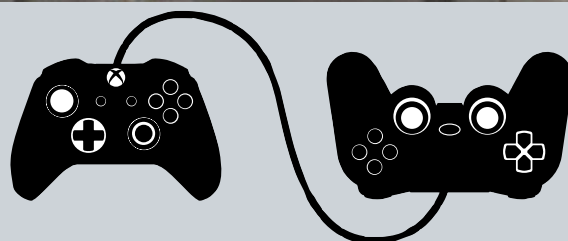
Giana Sisters: Dream Runners

★ 5.5/10

MISSING: An Interactive Thriller - Episode One Review

Publisher: Zandel Media
Developer: Zandel Media
Genre: Adventure
Platform: PC

By Ian Kuan

There was once a time when I likened episodic gaming to FMV games: a brief trend that had promise, but lacked longevity. With the staggered release of MISSING's chapters, I stand doubly corrected.

MISSING: An Interactive Thriller - Episode One, despite being titled in all caps, doesn't rush to unveil the whole of its plot. The story is like a PG-rated Saw movie. A family man is kidnapped and subjected to (mentally) torturous puzzles in a basement while a police investigator assigned with tracking down the kidnapper investigates crime scenes. In the hour of gameplay in the first episode, that skeleton of a plot is all the player receives. I am tempted to call this lacking, but given that this is a cheap FMV title, I will instead liken it to the way the film is shot: minimalistic.

Unlike the FMV titles of yore, video in MISSING is crisp, clear, and professionally shot. While
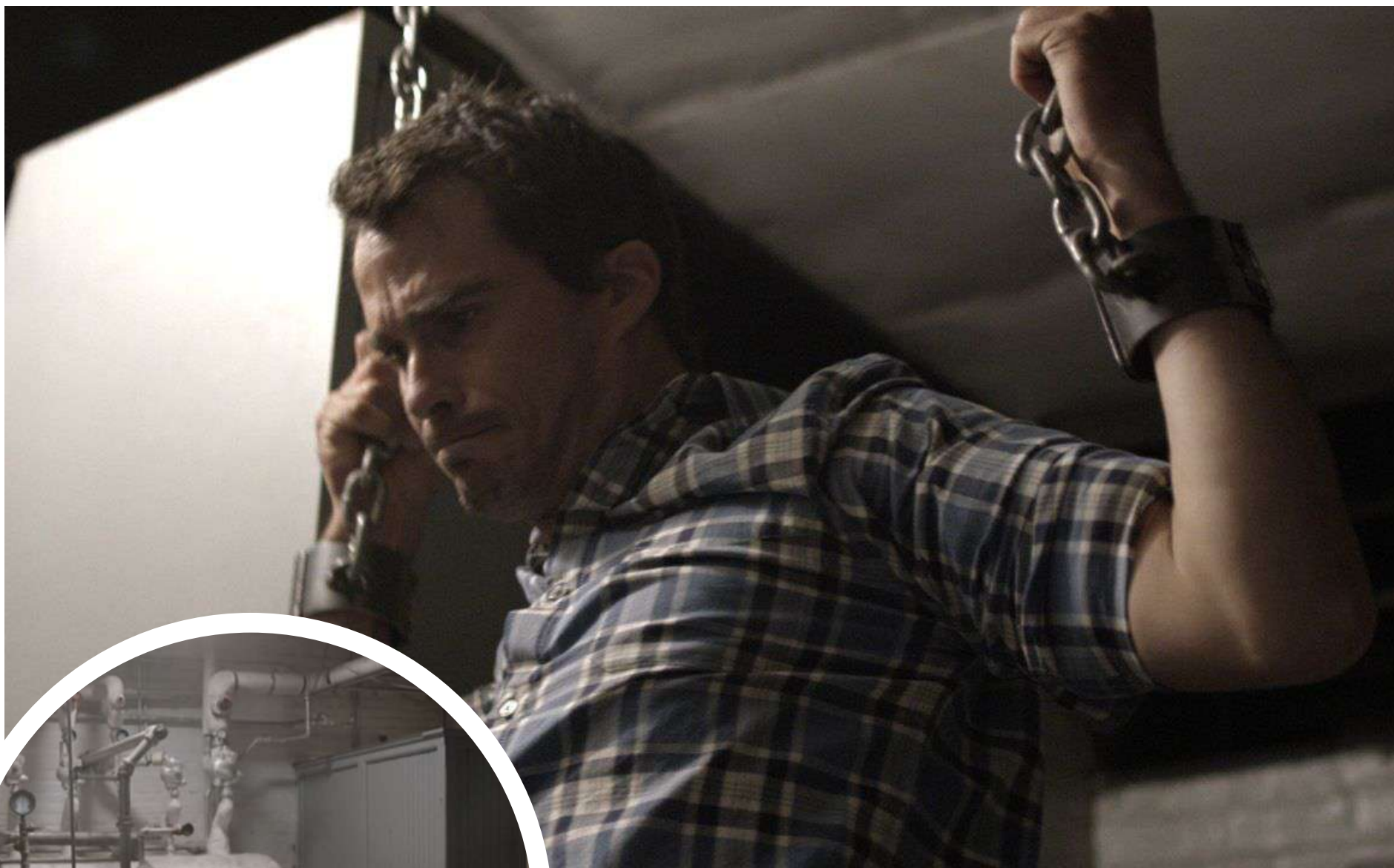
neither of the main characters chew the scenery, their actors don't bring anything special to the table. They are believable, but don't draw me into their conflicts. While the basement-like environments that dominate the game are rather plain, they are conducive to the hidden object puzzles that constitute the majority of gameplay. The puzzles I was presented with were on the easier side, but they involved just enough mental acuity to keep them satisfying. I was quite surprised to find quick time events sprinkled into the methodical searching and reasoning and while they aren't as offensive as they could be, they seemed like they were thrown into cinematic segments to make them feel more interactive.

With such a small portion of game, there is little else to say: the soundtrack is adequate, the sound effects passable, and the price reasonable. MISSING has my attention, but the next episodes need to escalate quickly or risk being mired in mediocrity. ∎
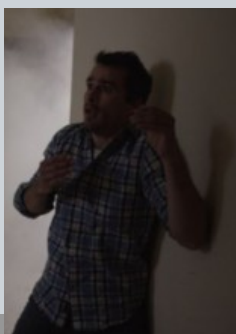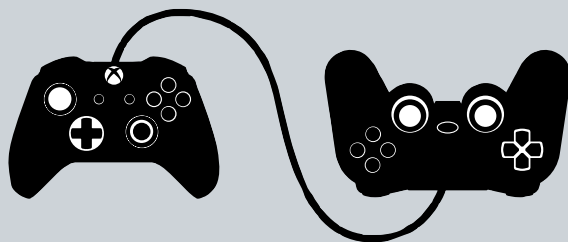
MISSING - Episode One

⭐ 6/10

F1 2015 Review

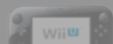**Publisher:** Codemasters
Developer: Codemasters
Genre: Racing
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One

By Steven Dawson

It seems that Codemasters is making a triumphant return to the racing games of yore, dropping the party game modes and celebrity voice-overs from their last iteration of games and focussing back on what it's all about - rubber meeting tarmac.

F1 2015 is Codemasters' first outing on the current gen, having held back GRID Autosport citing concerns that they wouldn't have been able to make the game they wanted to deliver at that point. Firing it up, you're given the choice between the 2014 season and the 2015 - depending on what you want to do. I jumped for the 2015 season and got to racing. If there's one thing this title does, it's that - gets you racing as soon as possible. There's no over-the-top character creation where you get to deliberate over the exact angle of the drivers

nose or the distance between their eyes; after all, it's going to be hidden by a helmet for the majority of the game and there's little in the way of additional "fluff". That is to say there's not much in the way of additional game modes. You get career, quick-race, online and time trial.

Career mode is quite an involved affair than your more casual racer too. To complete a race weekend, you'll be taking part in practice and qualifying sessions, leading to the actual race, which - at it's shortest setting is usually around about 15 laps. You can expect to be putting in about 30 minutes per weekend. It's refreshing to see

a developer tackle the core elements needed for the game without feeling the need to tack-on silly extras for the more casual crowd.

However, those who aren't die-hard racing aficionados will still find options for driving to make sure that they can still get round the tracks in one piece, as well as the ability to turn it all off and go for the most difficult experience. The AI opponents are brutal too, giving you a fighting challenge for positions. There were a couple of brief situations where the they were perhaps unfair,

seemingly without penalty too. A couple of nudges that had me spinning out of control were frustrating, but not common enough that it became anything more than 'in-the-moment' fury.

Codemasters has done an excellent job on the sound too, managing to capture the utterly flat and lifeless engines of the current season. Without their

screaming engines, F1 cars don't seem to capture the same excitement as they have in prior years, though I digress, as this isn't an issue with the game.

Graphically, the game looks great, having taken and polished the work they've already done from previous iterations of the F1 franchise. Presumably, there was a bit of work involved in the assets for the newest generation of consoles to enjoy, though it seems like there may have been a couple of places where it could have been optimised better. For example, flying down the main straight in the first race in Melbourne, there

was a clear drop in frame-rate. Codies were aiming for a 60fps experience with this title, but it seems that it's just out of their reach for now.

So the gameplay is fun and enjoyable, the audio is well done and the graphics are a sight to behold. All that remains is controls. My first blast with F1 2015 was with the controller, mostly to check it had installed

okay - nothing particular to report, it all handled as well as it was supposed to. I also spent a good while playing F1 2015 with the Thrustmaster TX too. It was a game-changing experience with the wheel, as you get a much greater degree of accuracy, allowing you to take the larger sweeping corners with greater ease and the game takes on new life when played in this way.∎

F1 2015

7/10

Funk of Titans Review

Publisher: Merge Games
Developer: A Crowd of Monsters
Genre: Action
Platform: PC
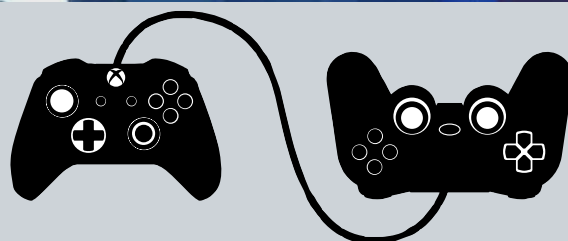
By Socrates

Absolutely nothing makes sense in Funk of Titans, and that's ok. While modern Greece is crippled by economic and societal complications, Ancient Greece is a calmer, more vibrant and funkier setting.

In Funk of Titans, you assume the role of Perseus, the living embodiment of a 1970's funk stereotype, in your quest to rid Ancient Greece of all other genres of music except funk. A side-scrolling endless runner, Funk of Titans sees you jump and fight your way through levels, avoiding warriors, fatal drops and fiery platforms in your journey to the jukebox that awaits you at the end. Levels are fairly short, about a minute or two each, and require you to simply reach the end without dying.

As the son of Zeus, Perseus ranks among the bravest and most powerful people in Greek mythology; beheading Medusa and fending off a myriad of Titans rank among his most famous accomplishments. In Funk of Titans, not so. Perseus can take just two hits

from enemies before dying, but a disappointingly easy difficulty curve robs Funk of Titans of much challenge. With that having been said, completing a level is the game's minimum requirement.

There are three main worlds (Pop, Rap and Funk) that are broken up into different levels, with a QTE mini-boss at the halfway stage, and a Titan at the end. The levels themselves posit three mini challenges: finish the level intact, collect all the gold discs and find the Pegasus. It is in these challenges that Funk of Titans totes some replayability. The game itself is fairly short, taking just a couple of hours to complete, but finishing the game to 100% completion would require a lengthier investment.

A progression system allows for new weapons to be unlocked, which in turn allow access to certain hidden areas in some levels, and Steam Achievements are plentiful, for those who are into that sort of thing. Collecting the Pegasus also unlocks a mini-game at the end of the level, where you must ride the horse for as long as possible, collecting gold discs, which act

as the game's currency, along the way. That currency can be used to buy items; anything from a Transformers helmet to a lightsaber, which add some originality to Perseus.

The battle with the three Titans...well they're not battles at all, really. Each world ends with a dance-off with a Titan, where you must assert funk as the most dominant of all music genres. Like the mini-boss, these come in the form of quick time events which, sadly, present minimal challenge (I got maximum points in every single section of every single dance-off), but provide a mildly humorous encounter if nothing else.

It isn't very long, and it isn't very difficult, but I enjoyed my time with Funk of Titans. It's a game that doesn't take itself very seriously at all; it has no problem in subverting the traditional expectations of Zeus, Hercules and Ancient Greek mythology in general. I mean, where else can you wear a Stormtrooper helmet and don a flaming sword? Hitting enemies is met with a 1960's Batman-esque 'wham' and 'bash', and the funky music and bright colours generate a nice atmosphere. While entirely nonsensical, it all adds to the fun and laidback approach the developers were clearly trying to achieve.■
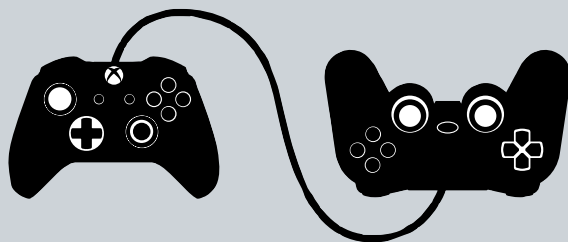
Funk of Titans
7/10

Biodrone Battle Review

Publisher: voodoosoft
Developer: voodoosoft
Genre: Action
Platform: PC

By Ben McCurry

Y ou have to give games a fair shake if you're a reviewer. Without getting bogged down in any murky 'ethics in videogame journalism' talk: if a reviewer hasn't spent enough time with a game, they can't provide an adequate response to it. However, there are always exceptions that prove the rule. Biodrone Battle is one such exception. I tried to sit down and play this game in earnest multiple times. I had good

intentions. I wanted to give it its chance, but every time I did, I had my hopes dashed and the effort of trying to be fair to this game gave me a headache.
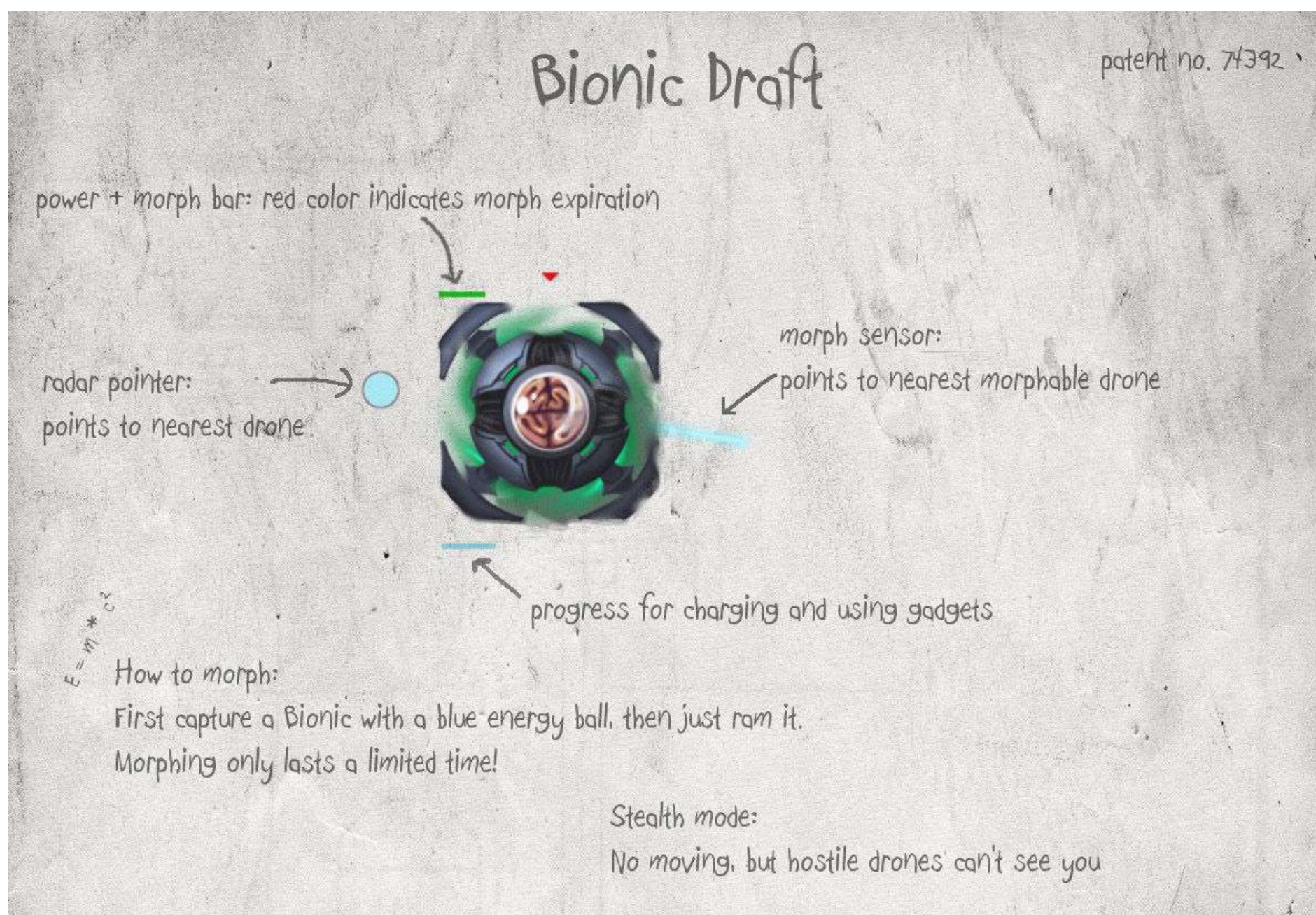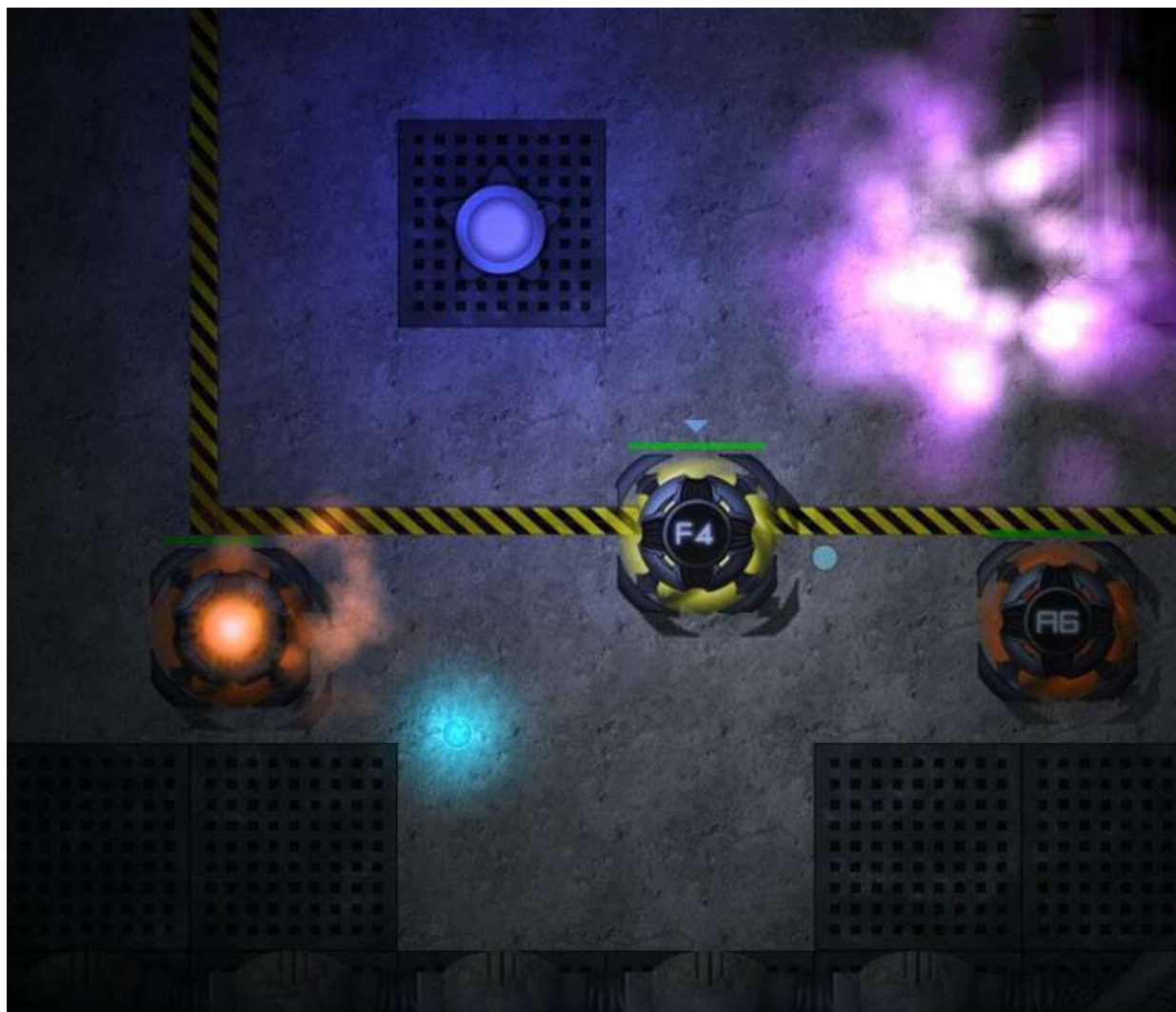
Biodrone Battle fancies itself as a robot arena fighting game with lasers, and while it does live up to that phrase by dint of including all of these components, the title achieves the amazing feat of making a game about robots fighting each other using laser

projectiles a dull annoyance. A playthrough starts in a small room with a teleporter; from there, you'll head off to other rooms where you'll be briefed on your mission, usually to take out the occupying robots. Sounds simple, right? Sure, but good luck getting past any one of these rooms. I have tried several times, and I have not been able to clear the first section. I can just about kill the very first enemy, then the second enemy blows me to smithereens – every single time. I nearly lost the will to live after the 20th time but, luckily, I didn't kill myself, thanks to the game deciding to crash after every subsequent run. All the ingredients were there: robots and lasers are seldom not a winning combination, but this is sadly only a recipe for tedium and frustration.

Why? To cut right to the point, Biodrone Battle is no fun at all. If you ever do get past the seemingly unwinnable second opponent (fantastic structuring at play there...), you'll discover a bland, monotonous, one-note game that doesn't do anything right. Battles against other robots always go at two speeds – mindless clickfests so treacle-slow that you'll be able to physically feel your soul leave your body, and, as noted, lightning-fast battles that will kill you faster than you can say, "3, 2, 1, activate". Trying

Bionic Draft

patent no. 74392

power + morph bar: red color indicates morph expiration

morph sensor:
points to nearest morphable drone

radar pointer:
points to nearest drone.

$E = m * c^2$

progress for charging and using gadgets

How to morph:
First capture a Bionic with a blue energy ball, then just ram it.
Morphing only lasts a limited time!

Stealth mode:
No moving, but hostile drones can't see you

Bionics: 10

Power: 120
Morph Energy: 48
Morph Time:

0.0.0

Power: 250
Morph Energy: 100
Morph Time:

0.0.0
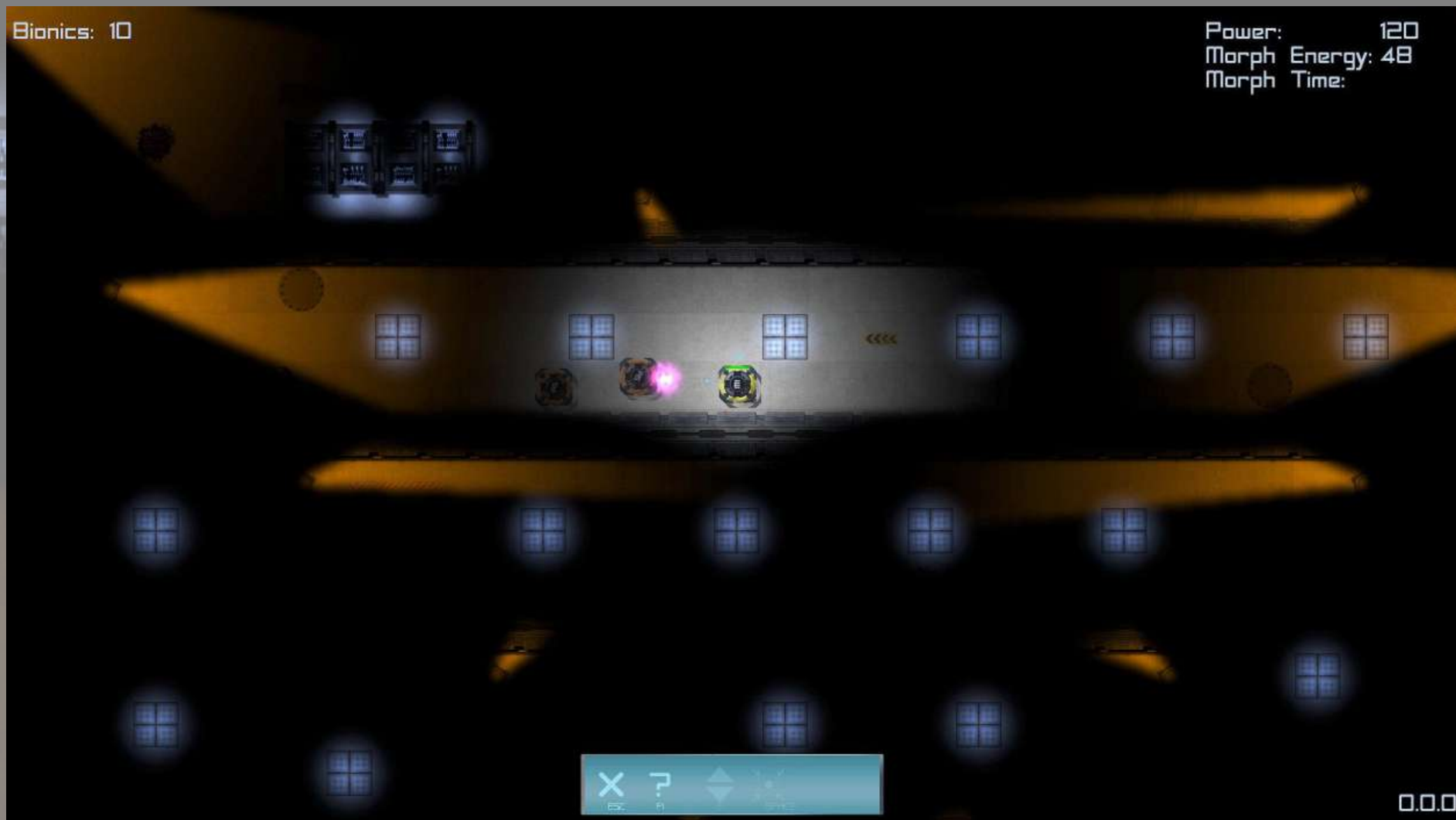
to kill enemies by your laser at any rate is joyless. There is an easier way to win; where you can "absorb" your opponent in order to take on their form, effectively killing them, but this also just serves to make the game more mundane. This is the most damning thing you could ever say about a game: Biodrone Battle is not broken, lazily-made, or offensive. It is just poorly thought out, and as such, does not deserve to exist. Cheekily, Biodrone Battle's Steam description features a quote from a Kotaku preview of the game, which describes it as "look[ing] well made and polished", which deserves nothing but derisive snort-laughter. The graphics are, debatably, on par with Flash games from 2003, and even those had more charm – actually, Lego was doing some great stuff with Flash then, and it was free; this costs £4.99 of actual money and it looks like a high school project. The developers were shooting for a dark, industrial aesthetic, featuring poorly-lit, grungy and graffitied hallways, marked with hazard tape and billowing steam, but the whole thing feels cheap and flimsy – like putting Razer against Diotoir,

Biodrone Battle breaks down in seconds against superior models. You'll never truly buy the darkened setting of this game – it's just too amateur.

The sound design is on the same level as the fun factor of this game – virtually non-existent. We get a few very low-key electronica-inspired tracks, but they're just as bland as the rest of this game. Oddly-put-together bleeps and bloops that create an atmosphere, not an ambience, that is guaranteed to leave the player cold and detach them from the game at hand. Once again, absolutely no thought was put in here.

Where's the joy? Where's the excitement? Videogames are meant to be a blank canvas where creator brings a world to life and player can live in it, not a grey prison of the mind. This is the gaming equivalent of porridge. If Steve Davis played videogames, this would be his favourite. This review might seem sparse, but there's honestly not much more to say. One last thing, though: if all games looked like Biodrone Battle, there would be no videogame industry – every player in it would be bored to suicide. ∎

Biodrone Battle
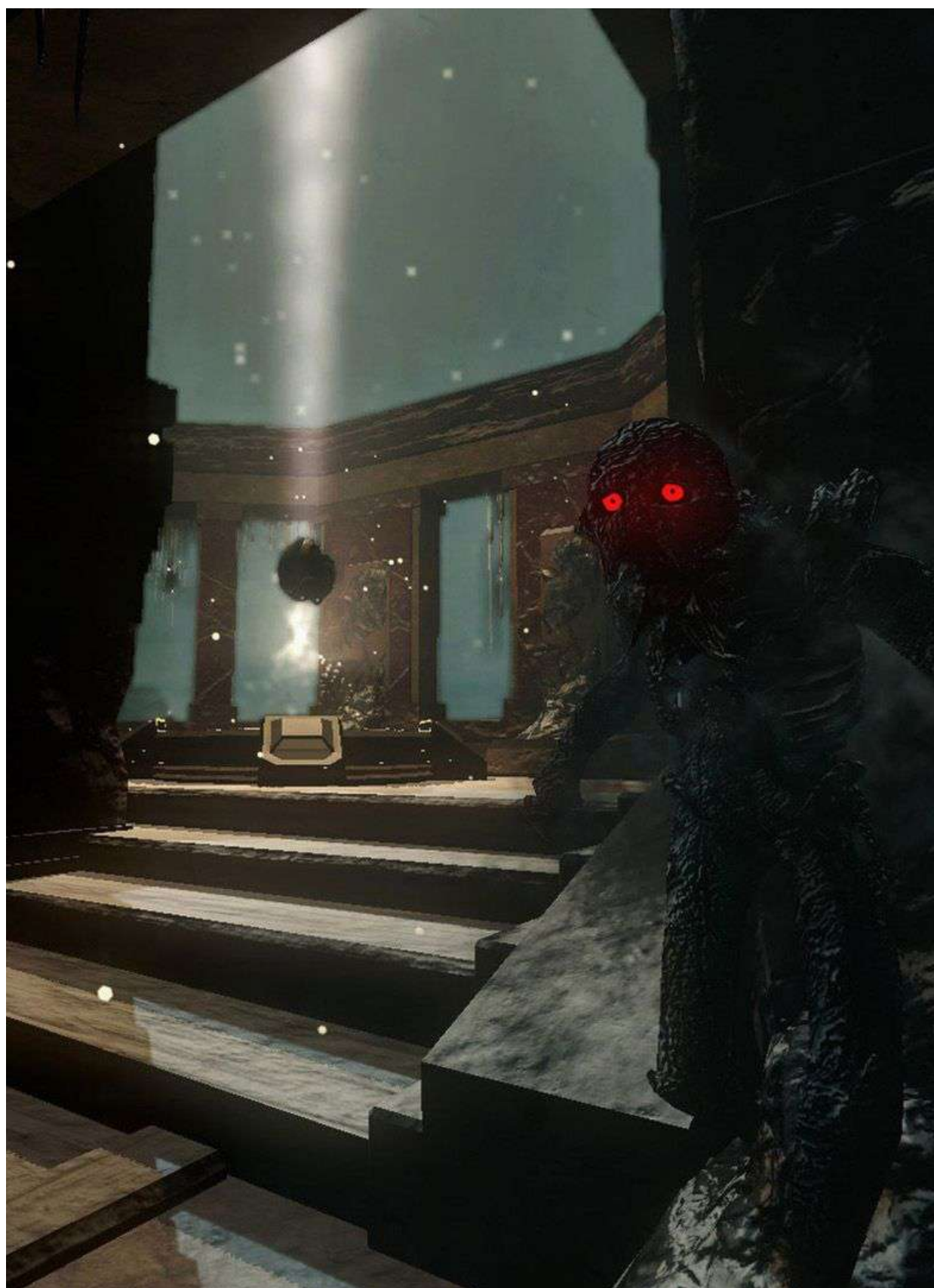# 3/10

The Flock Review

Publisher: Vogelsap
Developer: Vogelsap
Genre: Action
Platform: PC
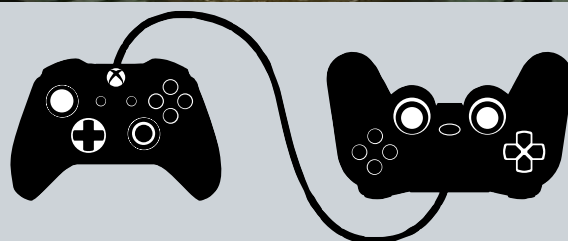
The Flock is a unique first person/horror/multiplayer experience filled with creatures trying to kill the light carrier, a member of the flock who has become a humanoid who carries a giant light gun. After there have been around 215 million deaths, the game will no longer be purchasable. While people may be disappointed that a game would just shut down like this the developers have already promised that the game will go out with a bang, in other words they have a special finale planned for those who have the game in their Steam library.

The game starts out with everyone playing as a creature of the flock and must try and grab the light producing artifact. Then things turn around and your fellow flock members become the enemy. While your

flock monster will seem fairly overpowered at the start, it turns out that the light from the artifact is your one true weakness. If the carrier shines the light on you, you turn to ash and have to respawn. The game adds another twist in that if you hold still as a flock member you will turn to stone and become immune to the light, however as soon as you move the light can hurt you again.

While this would seem to encourage the carrier to just camp you and rack up points the game has a counter to this strategy. As the carrier you have to continue moving or else the artifact will lose power

and it's lights out. Unfortunately as the carrier you are completely unable to jump over any obstacles in your way, whereas the flock are able to jump and dive all over the place in order to gain a better position over you. This makes choosing your path along the map a lot more difficult.

The flock also have some unique traits for hunting the carrier. You are able to leave a decoy that you can teleport back to if you think the carrier is about to shine the light on you. They are also able to use a shout that will give a temporary boost to

yourself and other flock members, but will also reveal your ally's current location.

Be prepared to have some jump scares when you play this game because every single player in the match is looking for you walking around with that little light on. That is one thing that has definitely set The Flock apart from other horror themed games, in that the monsters

left on the respawn timer will subtract that number from your current score. So if you have 75 points and decide to instantly respawn with 15 seconds left you will be down to 60 points.

Speaking of surroundings I have to say that the graphics in this game are pretty impressive considering they were created by such a small team. When you play as the flock you will notice that the game has a very grimy and dark look to it that suits your character's personae perfectly. The levels look the way they should for this style of game, whether you are fighting in the grungy looking factory, or the wide open caves filled

chasing you are not simple AI that follow you around the map, instead you are up against actual thinking players who will try to outflank and gank you.

The whole idea behind this game is to stay alive as long as possible as the carrier and shine

your light on blue objectives that spawn around the map. Now there is a catch with dying as a flock member that actually took me a couple of matches to realize. When you die you have the option to respawn instantly instead of waiting for the timer, however the amount of seconds

with statues of Flock creatures, you will find yourself admiring the work the developers have put into making the game look as creepy as possible.

Sadly after you consider all of this, you will find that you have explored the majority of the content. With only three maps to play on for the entirety of the game you are going to find that after maybe three or four hours, the game gets to be extremely repetitive. During the closed testing of this game I would have given it an 8/10 review because it seemed like a fairly cool game, however after some more extensive play on release I have come to realize just how unfinished this game is. Unfortunately the game servers were only online for an

hour at a time during closed testing so it had a big impact on how much replayability I saw in the game. Considering that the game costs 17.99 CAD I can say that the amount of content in this game is not worth the price. For a game that has a limited number of lives the game is still very unpolished and buggy. There are now some incidents where you will randomly fall through the floor or get actually code string errors.

The Flock is a game that had a unique idea and game

concept, however it seems the developers focused too much on the idea of a limited number of lives, and less on the game's content. Unfortunately I cannot recommend this game for its current price due to the fact that you can play through the majority of the game's features and content in a few hours. The graphics are not horrible for such a small team and the sound engineer did an amazing job, however the rest of the game fails miserably at being worth 17.99 CAD.■

The Flock
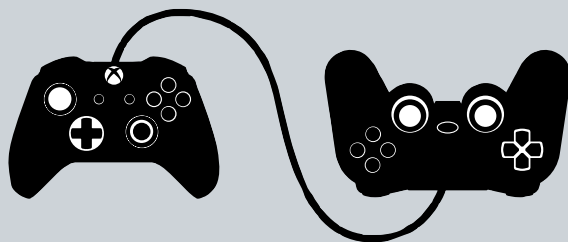# 3/10

Until Dawn Review

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Supermassive Games
Genre: Survival Horror
Platform: PS4

Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Calum Parry

Who doesn't love a good horror movie? The fear, tension and death wrapped up a 90-minute movie that will either frighten you or amuse. Now, take that concept; the same B-grade teen horror, mix it up with the usual tried and tested cliches, make it entirely interactive and you get Until Dawn from Supermassive Games.

In Until Dawn your decisions and choices affect the outcome of a situation, or decide the fate of the character and others. Taking inspiration from Quantic Dream's games, creators of Heavy Rain and Beyond: Two Souls, Until Dawn uses the Butterfly Effect and the whole premise is based around this theory. The differences can be subtle or impact the story in such a way that replayability is at the forefront of it's design. Even the simplest of choices like siding with someone or choosing to pick up something or not can have repercussions.

The story within Until Dawn doesn't do anything original and only serves as a foundation of the gameplay. Taking place in a winter lodge on top of Mount Washington, ten friends gather for their annual winter getaway. After a prank backfires leaving one of the girls, Hannah, to run into the wilderness, her sister, Beth, goes after and events from here take a turn for the worse leading to their disappearance. A year later Josh, the sister's brother, invites everyone to return to reconcile and find answers. It's from here where the story of choices, survival and horror begins until dawn.

Until Dawn is structured similarly to a TV show. Each

chapter begins with a recap of events, showing you the results of your choices and the impact they have upon the characters; it works, but the nuisance is that it occurs after every chapter and is unskippable as it acts as a hidden loading screen.

Prior to the start of each chapter you are greeted to an interesting discussion with a Dr Alan Hill (played by Peter Stormare), a psychiatrist who asks the player direct questions about their own fears and questions their morality, which adds more immersion to the world and affects the environments. Depending on your choices all the characters are playable and they're the usual bunch of american teens. The connections between the

friends are either childhood friends, ex-lovers, a couple or just "friends" stuck in the category of will-they-or-won't-they. You're even provided with such information upon introduction. The only standout characters who you are first introduced to are Sam and Chris, everyone else is either instantly dislikable or forgettable. They're are believable and the acting is excellent from each of the cast, but their personalities are pretty much the same as any teen horror movie that inspired them, and it's clear that this is what the developers were going for.

Until Dawn's main problem goes beyond its storytelling: pacing is an issue. At first It's

a slow burner and takes fair amount of time to actually kick in. The slow introduction, like any horror movie, is in place to get you acquainted with the characters before taking a turn for the worse. This is plagued, however, at certain points the game will jump to another character to progress through their part in the story, ending almost every scenario at a cliffhanger. It's awkward, used to keep you hooked giving you the whole, wait and see what happens next moment.

The same can be said for the gameplay, Until Dawn has some bothersome controls. You get the choice at the start to use either traditional controls or motion controls, I stuck with traditional as motion controls

can be a nuisance and I'd rather not be waving my dual-shock controller around trying to move in-game. The game has fixed camera angles, that can be annoying at times when trying to navigate the environments. One minute it'll be facing

forwards and next from behind. Anyone who's played the older Resident Evil titles will know.

Throughout the game you'll come across totems, which are more than just collectables. These give you an insight into

events that will occur, whether it be some guidance for the future, a vision of a possible character death, loss, danger or fortune. Gathering all these helps build "The Events of the Past" and make the story clear. Other collectables found throughout are clues to mystery behind the killer and past events, these can be picked up using the X button and with the R2 and the right analogue stick you can turn and move objects in a similar fashion to The Order 1886. This is also the same for all other interactions doors, buttons and similar objects.

Your choices are made using the right analogue stick and you can pick one of two options, but when in the intense heat of the moment the game takes over the movement leaving you to with deal with an abundance of quick time events depending how awry the situation goes. It's cliché gameplay, but in this it couldn't be done any other way. It is an interactive story after all.

With jump scares, blood curdling gore, psychopaths that hunt you and some added torture porn made so iconic by the Saw franchise questioning your morality. Until Dawn is

frightening, inspiration is everywhere and has something for any horror fan and shows that the developers truly have a love for the genre.

Until Dawn's visuals are impressive, graphically it stands as one of the best looking PlayStation 4 exclusive titles available. The environments, shadows and lighting are all highly detailed and the developers have put great attention to detail in each and every area, whether it is the inside of the lodge, the stormy winter of the forest or an abandoned cabin; detail is everywhere. Sound design is also top notch, with eerie effects that send chills throughout and with music and sounds intensifying a of foreboding and dread, there is even an excellent opening title song called "O'Death" by Amy Van Roekel to give that real movie feel. The characters are the visual highpoint with impressively detailed facial animations, showing clear emotion whether it be laughter or distress.

Until Dawn is an interactive love letter to all things horror. It's immersive, with excellent atmosphere throughout. Yes,

it has it's problems especially with it's pacing, but it's still well designed and thought out. The characters seamlessly interconnect with one another, with your choices and the consequences having an impact on how each scenario plays out and on who lives or dies. It encourages replayability and hides glistening secrets within.

Until Dawn is an excellent addition to any horror fan's PlayStation 4 collection, even if borrowed or rented, you'll still be satisfied with a single 9-10 hour playthrough, but the seeming unending paths towards terror, gore, death and salvation will keep you coming back to see if you can survive another night until dawn..∎
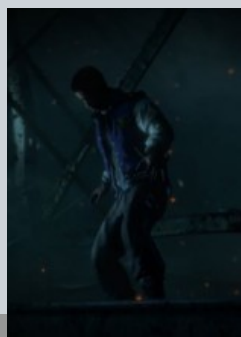
Until Dawn
7/10

Legends of Eisenwald

Legends of Eisenwald Review

Publisher: Aterdux Entertainment
Developer: Aterdux Entertainment
Genre: Adventure
Platform: PC

Game of Thrones, which I'm sure we all watch by now, is notorious for its continuous plot twists and characters with ulterior motives. Every time I watch it, I know I can't relax too much, as the next betrayal or murder will be just around the corner. I can't say that

Legends of Eisenwald is exactly like Game of Thrones, but that restlessness and distrust that every character inspires is still present. However, the way the story of Legends of Eisenwald is presented lacks the flair the show has. Even though you still get that feeling of melancholy and desperation, and know that

you can't trust any NPC with personality, you can still look at the mechanics and feel like a child again, knowing that they're far from being mature and in tune with the tone of the story.

The game that comes to mind when looking at Iis none other than the prodigal Age

of Empires. There's plenty to discriminate between one and the other, indeed, but their affinity is clearly visible, particularly in the campaign and visuals. Legends of Eisenwald does not require you to manage cities and distribute resources, commerce with other factions or create battle strategies with your different battalions. It is much more narrative-focused, putting emphasis on the individual story of your character, with a clearly delineated story arc, but not so much personality. Namely, it is clear what drives the characters throughout the story, but they feel quite empty and their dialogue lines are bereft of charisma.

This is perhaps one of the main problems in Legends of Eisenwald: the dull and uninspired exposition. As your party travels across the late-medieval lands of Eisenwald — in Germany, apparently — you'll find a plethora of people to talk with. You'll discuss about politics, gossip about incestuous relationships, seal deals, buy equipment and more. However, there's a lot of meaningless text and no voice over. It seems that the nobility protocol of

interaction has thoroughly been transposed into this game, which feels that most of the things they're saying could be massively summed up, with little to no significance in setting the world or the story. What's more, although the grand scheme of the story has its perils and thrills, the minutiae of the drama that allows it to happen is completely unimportant and superfluous to the player, and the exposition makes it even duller altogether.

The storyline I followed is one of revenge, where I, a Baroness, was betrayed by my bannermen and (now former) allies, who

killed my whole family while I was away from the castle. She sets out to seek revenge and army to reconquer her lands, and make the traitors pay for their crimes. Throughout her quest, she meets plenty of characters and hear plenty of stories that intend to add flavour to the world, but the way this quest is told makes them counterproductive. In many occasions, it seems they are side plots that the developers included to give you more play time and simulate the feeling of choice, whereas no matter what you decide to partake in, the choices are devoid of meaning. It's a pity that this fantastic world was seasoned with dull exposition, as there are enough characters and theatrics to produce an enticing story.

Legends of Eisenwald has three different storylines. Depending on who you choose at the beginning of the game, a Knight, a Baroness or a Mystic, the story of the game unfolds differently. As a Knight, your assets are melee-based; as the Baroness, you wield either a bow or a crossbow to take down enemies from a distance; and as the Mystic, you can use magic to modify stats in your favour. The characters that join your endeavours along the campaign are variations of these: pikemen, cavalry, healers, etc.; and any variation of these that you can achieve as you level up and find loot to customise your characters. Of course, these characters have different abilities and work best in different situations.

The combat in this game can be, at first, somewhat obtuse due to an apparent lack of depth. During the first stages of the game, it is true that the combat is simple — way too simple, as each character can only attack the nearest enemy to them. However, as you gather up advocates to your cause and they start gaining experience, the abilities that they acquire leave room for a much wider
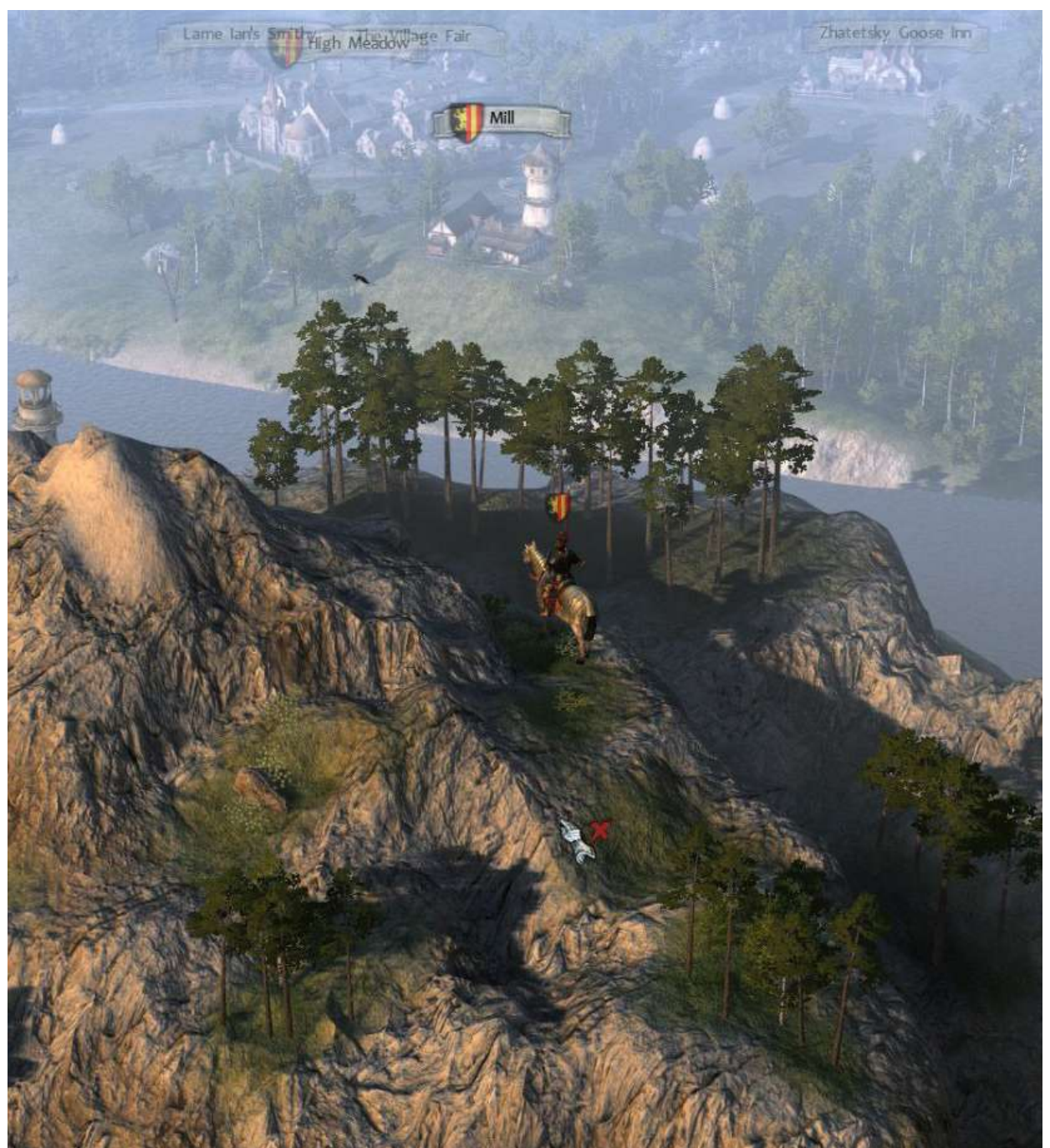
combat system. My strategy was always based around pikemen, who deal special damage if an enemy charges towards them. I made sure I bought plenty of armour and weapons to strengthen them, and with a couple of boosts by mages and a reliable line of archers behind, I had an impenetrable front line that withstood any attack.
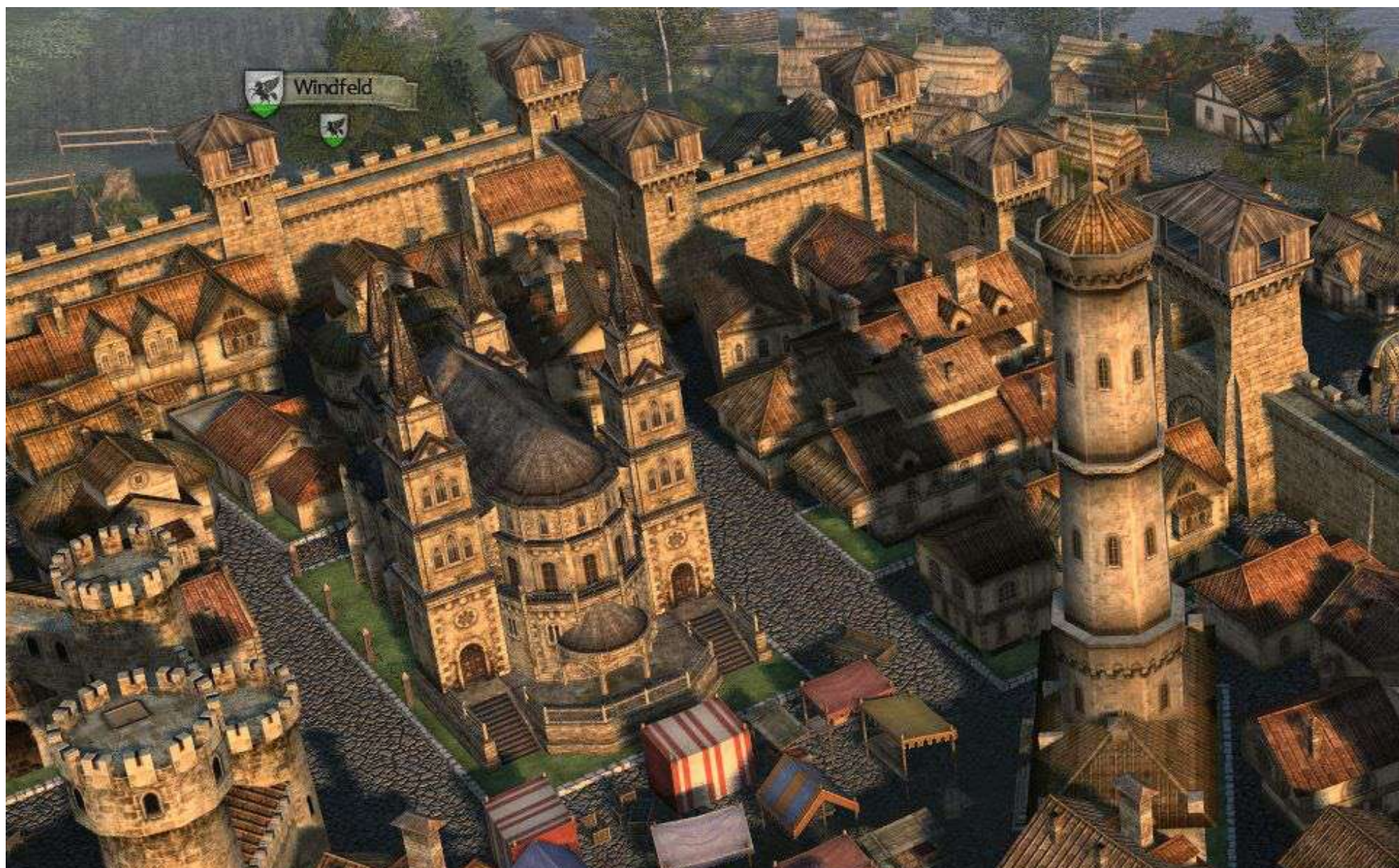
Nevertheless, all battles ultimately can become negligible, as the slow turn-based system can alienate many. I found the inclusion of a button that allows the battle to resolve itself really odd, which becomes particularly useful in those that are too challenging. It's not that I don't like a good challenge, it's that I didn't find battles and their outcome rewarding enough to be bothered to knuckle down and think every move through. I spent the first great part of the game doing so, but after a while, I decided that I was wasting my time.

If I had been able to keep all characters throughout the game, maybe I would have been more attached to them, but in the first five hours, my party — which I had spent money

and care on — dispersed twice just for the sake of the story, making it feel quite artificial. This made my party all the more indifferent to me, as I saw them as heads for hire, rather than loyal allies — only loyal because they didn't have a brain; I bet they would have stabbed me in the back if they had been able. This was even more noticeable when one of my best men decided not to fight for me because I didn't have money to pay for his services.

This takes me to the unexplained economy. The way you gather money from conquered towns and fallen enemies is soon picked up, but it is difficult to notice. You start off with a ton of money, which quickly evaporates if you hire many mercenaries. However, if you keep a considerable amount of towns under your control — by fighting the mob that's in control of them —, you can collect taxes from them. Winning battles will also reward you with money, but not

we see the similarities with Age of Empires (maybe with Baldur's Gate too, but in lesser measure). Whereas the music is excellent — a sort of Celtic tune to them that is very suggestive of medieval times, the visuals are obsolete; they're just too functional, which may present as a problem. The scale of people and building is strangely disproportionate, and although I understand that the sprite of my character is symbolic and represents my

enough to rely your economy on them. This constantly keeps you on the lookout for any town that may have been retaken by rebel factions, and puts a constraint on what you buy, making you focus on paying

the mercenaries, rather than providing them with the best habiliment, particularly if they all vanish as you finish the level.

It is in terms of visual style and level progression where

whole party, I can't help to think that Age of Empires II, a game from 1999, fared better in that regard. All my main points of criticism can be encapsulated in this last statement, as Legends of Eisenwald feels like an anachronism.

Legends of Eisenwald would have been an incredibly good game had it been made fifteen years ago. The combat mechanics are dated and lack the depth that we see in modern days, whereas the introduction to the mechanics and the exposition of the story are neglectful and unentertaining when we frame it in modern-day game storytelling. It's not all vicennial-old trends, but what is not isn't significant enough to make a hit. I didn't love this game, but some child inside me was awaken with feelings strangely familiar. Videogames have evolved a lot in the past 15 years, but Legends of Eisenwald is still stuck on the late '90s.∎

Legends of Eisenwald

6/10

Party Hard Review

Publisher: tinyBuild
Developer: Pinokl Games
Genre: Action
Platform: PC
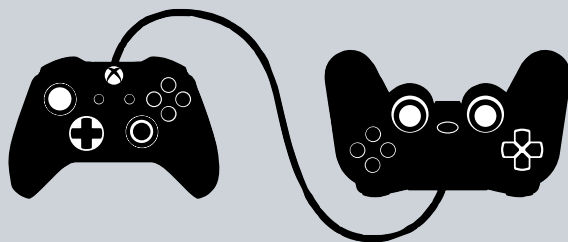
Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Andrew Duncan

When I previewed this, it was a single level which I played over and over again. The tune got stuck in my head. And it's still there. It's driven me so crazy, I want to murder people! Luckily, I have a game in which to do it -- it's a vicious cycle.

Party Hard is a game where you follow the exploits of a man who just wanted to sleep, when a house party wouldn't stop. So he snapped and went on a rampage across America, pursued by a police force who had no way to stop him as he hit shindig after rave in 12 locations.

It's hardly Chaucer, but this is a game with pixel graphics and music that just. keeps. looping. It's meant to be fun, and by hell it certainly is. It has a Hotline Miami vibe to it, with a humourous take on uber violence, but there are many differences. The action takes place all on one screen, your character is committing all of these murders through their own volition, you only have a knife, and people generally don't care that all of these partiers are being slain.

They are put out that there is the odd body scattered about, and if they spot a fresh one they will call the police, but it's never enough to end the party. Even when you set fire to the dance floor, or let off a smoke bomb upon it and stab everyone, the worst you will see are people complaining "These bodies are getting me down". Well, the worst that will happen is your arrest, but that's besides the point.

The failure criteria are: you get arrested or you kill yourself. Get spotted as many times as you like, and so long as you

can escape the fuzz, you are generally able to get off scot-free. You can stab three people in plain sight of everyone, but as long as you can run far enough, the police will give up and people will seem to forget that you did anything. Though a few partiers might beat you unconscious for a few seconds if you're too obvious about it.

It's actually a little more complicated than that, as each person has a 'suspicion meter'. The higher it gets, the more likely they are to finger you for a new murder, and will make sure to stay away from you if you move near to them. Not that you have to be near them to kill them.

As well as the stabbing are the mostly-random environmental hazards. Some things like telephones and DJ decks are going to always be there, but some of the most fun things are placed randomly each time you start a level. Horses, bears and pandas, entire room layouts, exploding speakers and gumball machines... If you replay a level four times, you probably won't see the exact same layout twice.

And replay you shall, as Party Hard is a challenging game. I usually hate too much of a challenge, but when you're down to seven victims

remaining and run out of stamina just too late to stop the one who fingered you from reaching the phone... I won't lie, I hated so many of the party-goers for dobbing me in, I never left a level unfinished before exiting the game. I had to restart one level almost 20 times, and the last attempt took me over 12 minutes of meticulous planning, but this is the hardest game I've kept myself from rage-quitting.

It has crashed a couple of times, however. Not for any particular reason, though perhaps as if to tell me "You've played enough for now". There was also at least one instance of a woman walking without her limbs moving. Apart from

that, I didn't encounter any issues with Party Hard.

The one bad point I would remark on, is that things can be a little repetitive. I personally don't mind it, but I know that

some people would blast the game due to it being the same thing over and over. Start a level, set up some environmental kills, follow some people and stab them, hide the bodies or run away before they're seen, rinse and repeat. With 12 levels at seven minutes each on average, it's a short game -- so long as you can do a perfect run. You can easily spend half an hour on one level and not manage to complete it.

The length of Party Hard is extended by making it pure Let's Play material. It has Twitch compatibility built-in right out of the box. You have to go to Twitch and get

a code, but once it's authorised you can interact with viewers from inside the game. In each level there are a series of events with a timer running down, for a couple of minutes. As each viewer types in a number into the chat, the game tallies them up and one of three random events will occur in the party. It can be a bear attack, a SWAT raid, a bunch of party girls will arrive… These random events can be triggered by the player using the same phone partiers will use to call the police, but

only once per level. It can make things more challenging, or easier, depending on what viewers choose. Will you get more victims, or will a bear help you out?

It's also a good sign that, less than a week after release,

developer Pinokl Labs released a content update, and confirmed that they will never release DLC, just free content. So it turns out that even if you find it repetitive, it will be a while before you can't come back to the game every so often..■

Party Hard

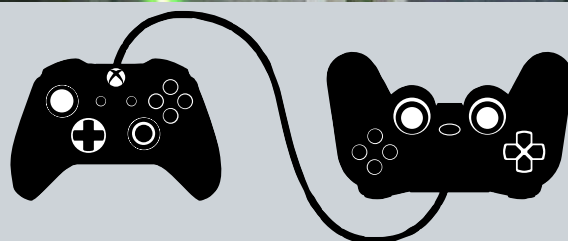# 8/10

Executive Assault Review

Publisher: Hesketh Studios
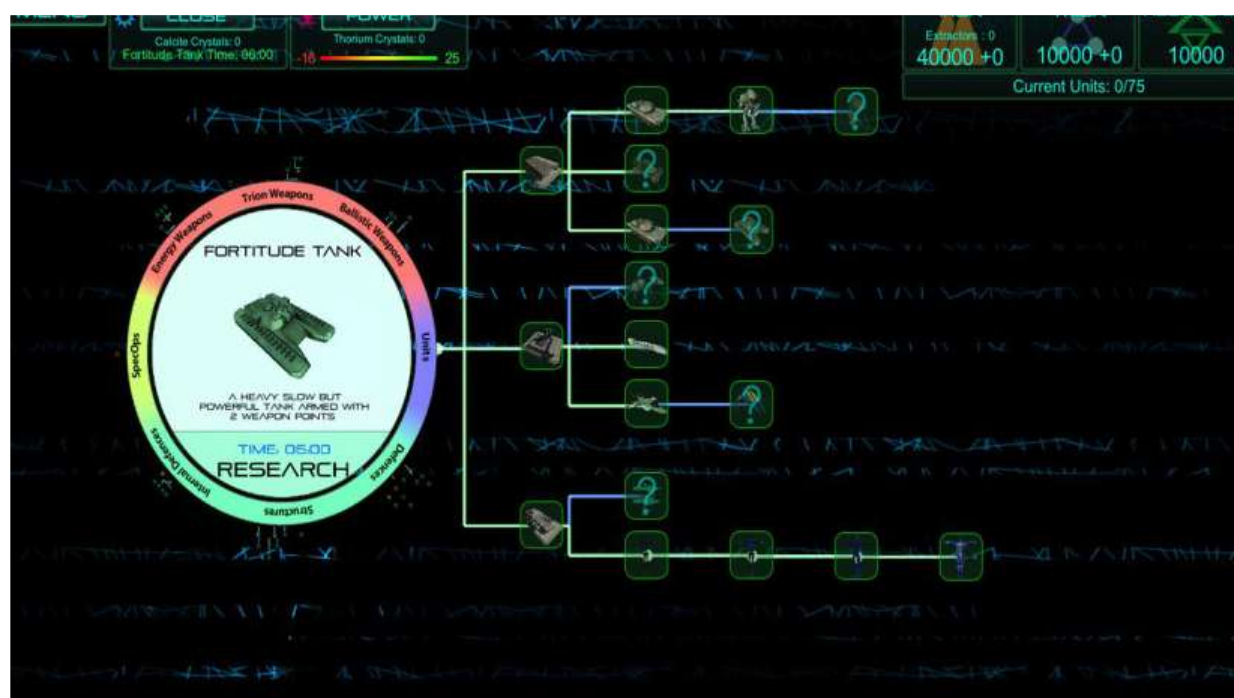**Developer:** Hesketh Studios
Genre: Action
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Christian Wootton

E arly Access games have a bit of a bad reputation at the moment thanks to one or two titles that have not done themselves any favours by failing to meet expectations. Thankfully Executive Assault has none of those failings. Being a hybrid RTS and FPS game it looks a bit "Derek

Smart" at first glance, but unlike that luminary of gaming's past titles it meets and "in many ways" exceeds its expectations.

The game itself has a really rather simple set up. You are the CEO of a super corporation out to do what mankind does best, strip everything in sight of resources, killing anything that gets in the way. The simplest way to do this is build a shedload of units and buildings, steamroller the opposing Corporations own buildings and units and then shoot their CEO in the face. Simple isn't it?

No, it's not. As the CEO you are using a neural interface to connect to the facilities of your own base, designing new things (weapons, units etc.), building new things, and defending yourself from the opposition. Said opposition is of course trying to shoot you in the face in turn so you better watch out for that.

The game has five resources for you to juggle, the basic one is Iron. This is what you make almost everything from so make sure you have buckets of it. Next up is Electricity, without this you're stuffed, leading to

instances of your thinking (in the words of fictional astronaut Mark Watney) "I'm f**ked and I'm gonna die!" because nothing will work and your opponent will just wander right in and you won't be able to do a thing to stop it. After this you have Thorium and one named after the developer (Heskosium) for the more complex bits.

Gameplay in Executive Assault is smooth, with A.I opponents having some brain to them as well as amusing names like The Janitor and The Shift Supervisor, and the switch between RTS and FPS is easy to manage thanks

to a UI that makes sense and is a nice and clear, you have no idea how pleasing that is to someone who has had to wrestle with far too many clunky RTS UI's in the past (I'm looking at you Battlecruiser 3000ad).

There are one or two downsides to the game though, the inability to blow up the other sides buildings is an annoyance and some of the visuals for the resources are a little on the small and difficult to spot side, but that could just be my ageing eyes failing me once again.

Researching new designs is done through another clean and easy to understand

UI which displays exactly enough information without being needlessly cluttered.

The surprising thing about Executive Assault is that it's the product of a one man studio. Yes you read that right, this is all the product of Robert Hesketh, he of Hesketh Studios.

All in all, this is a tight, funny, enjoyable melding of two disparate genres that works rather well. If you enjoyed

Carrier Command : Gaia Mission you'll love this one too. The extensive research tree allowing you to create gigantic robots piloted by Martini drinking pilots, orbital strikes that obliterate the whole map, direct control of any unit you choose, cooperative or adversarial multiplayer and continuing updates from the developer all combine to make this one to buy, play, and keep an eye on now it's out of Early Access and at release stage. ∎
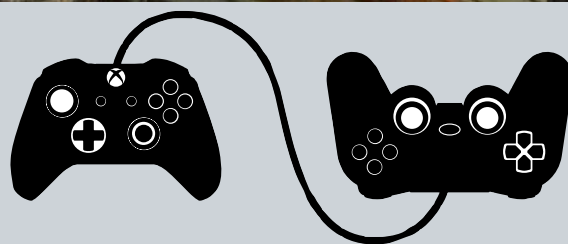
Executive Assault
8.5/10

26 DMG

12 DMG

Shadowrun: Hong Kong Review

Publisher: Harebrained Holdings
Developer: Harebrained Holdings
Genre: RPG
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Ian Kuan

S hadowrun, the pen and paper game, is an exercise in improvisation. As a squad of off the books mercenaries, hours of planning and legwork go into a job before players actually dive in and go for their payday. Jobs are completed or failed in minutes and plans never survive contact with the enemy because twists are an integral part of the game. This cocktail of chaos inevitably leads to intensely dramatic and comically absurd moments during a given mission. It's nearly impossible to capture this dichotomy in a videogame with no live game master, but Shadowrun: Hong Kong comes damn close.

Set in the cyberpunk-meets-fantasy dystopia of 2050s Hong Kong, Shadowrun: Hong Kong is the third installment of the Shadowrun Returns series.

A deep, highly customizable character generation system greeted me when I began a new game - standard fare for the notoriously complex Shadowrun franchise. Skills and attributes are purchased with Karma points that are spent at character creation and earned throughout the game - there is no character class system, so the player can mix and match as they see fit. After I spent an inordinate amount of time crafting my character, she was thrown against the shores of Hong Kong and embroiled in the case of her missing father and his mysterious plea for help. If this sounds familiar, then you've likely played Returns and Dragonfall, since all three games use very similar hooks - amongst other things.

While the game still employs the Unity engine, graphics and animations are slightly slicker than in the previous two games. Characters move with more energy and pizzazz, and environments have a greater density of detail. The visuals won't win any competitions with AAA titles, but the art direction gives the game the
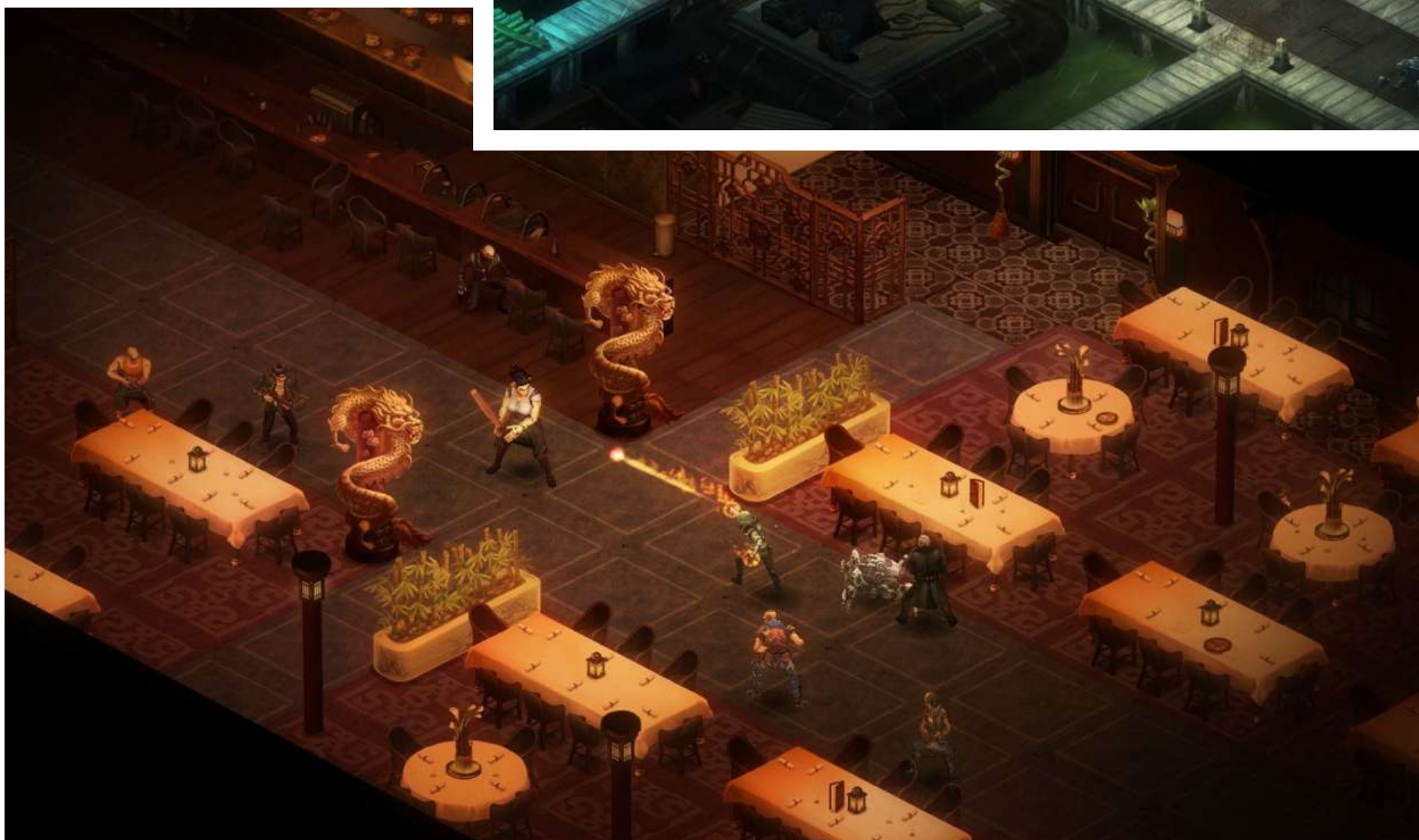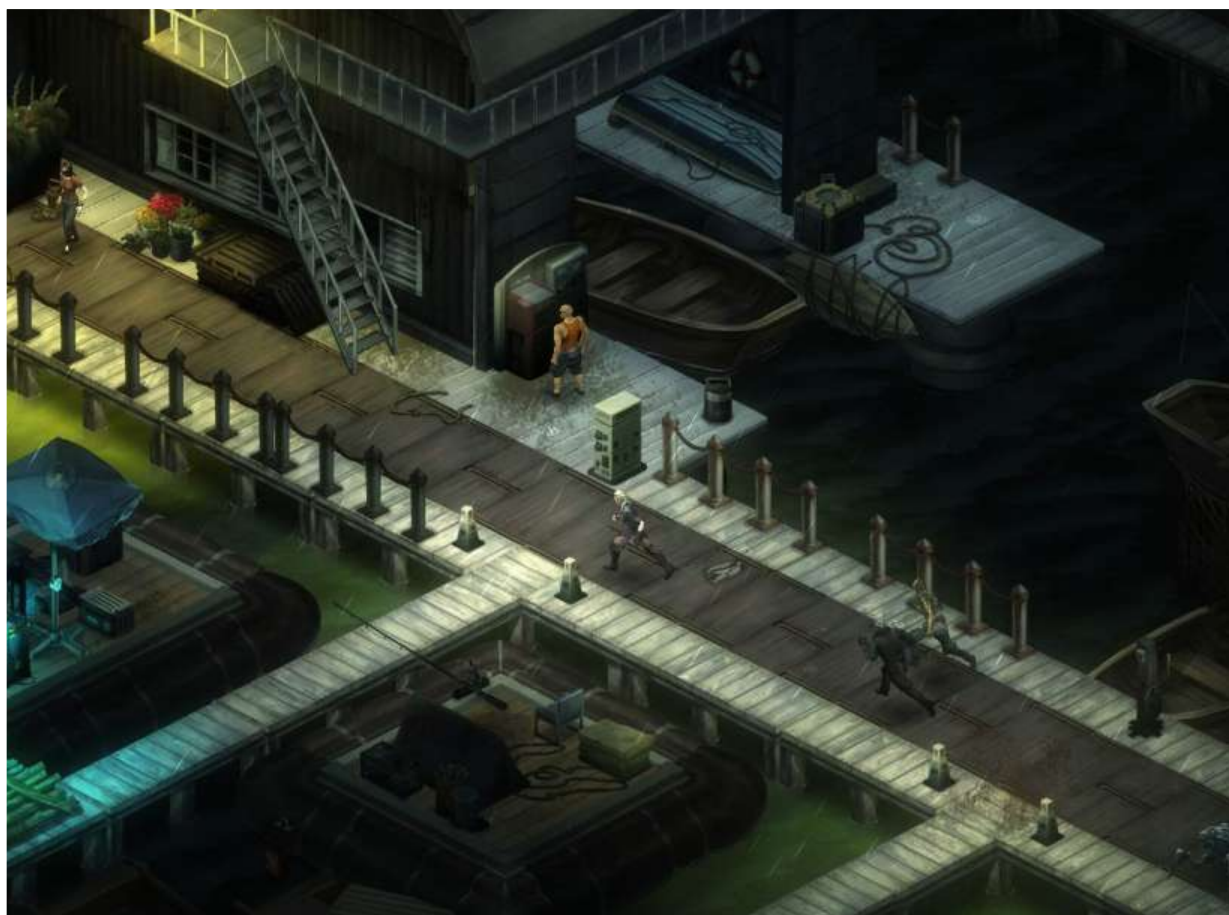
cyberpunk look it deserves. Character portraits are generally crisp and detailed, but are occasionally marred by a touch of sloppy photoshop. One troll I spoke to had tusks that were obviously tacked on, as they were not wreathed with lips but sitting rather plainly on his face. Sound design falls into the same ballpark, with gunshots, footsteps, and environmental fluff meandering through various shades of average. The aural landscape of Shadowrun: Hong Kong has very little "oomph" to it. The vast majority of sound effects are atmospheric, with only a few combat sounds providing a significant amount of drama. Fortunately, the meat of the gameplay and story are far better.

Though very similar to that of the previous titles, interaction with the game world has been improved. Outside of combat, basic logic puzzles and challenges abound. Once the lead starts flying, time congeals into a turn based system where positioning and proper use of special abilities is key. While the AI isn't very bright, enemies pose enough of a challenge to make for some nail biting encounters. The biggest flaw with combat is that the cover system is inconsistent - corners in particular are difficult to parse when it comes to flanking. Though some players may choose to skip hacking entirely, computerized warfare is completely different from Returns and Dragonfall. Hacker characters now need to avoid

virtual security patrols while jacked in and play a simple, but fun, pair of matching games to access valuable data.

While scrolling through the lengthy text of Shadowrun: Hong Kong I alternated between rapt reading of fascinating dialogue to spitting out my water with laughter. The game has a distinct, gritty feel that is complemented by believable characters whose lines enriched an already bountiful setting. From the conspiratorial overtures of the main plot to random people on the street, Shadowrun: Hong Kong makes every conversation feel right. Deeply personal stories come

out a little more easily than they do in real life, but their contents are logical and make for good reading. Of particular note are the varied personalities of the player's runner team. From tortured and unsure Duncan Wu to pleasantly sarcastic Gobbet, each of the characters unfolds into a page turning story. Furthermore, humorous anecdotes and situations abound. Illegal online poetry slams, rogue noodle

dispensers, and snarky dialogue all had me busting a gut at the most unexpected moments.

With its colorful setting and top notch writing, it's hard to dislike Shadowrun: Hong Kong. Hardcore RPG fans will definitely find their money well spent, but even more casual fans can select one of the game's pre-generated characters and appreciate the plot. ∎
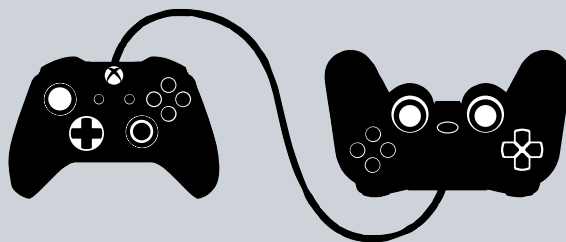
Shadowrun: Hong Kong
8/10

Reviews

No Time To Explain Remastered

No Time To Explain Remastered Review

Publisher: tinyBuild
Developer: tinyBuild
Genre: Platformer
Platform: PC, Xbox One

By Matt Wilhelm

It is truly amazing how a game that was created in something as simple as Flash and turns into something as amazing as a game like The Binding of Isaac. No Time to Explain Remastered is one of those games. TinyBuild studios managed to take a Flash game that was great in idea, however due to the limitations of the Flash engine couldn't really shine in practice. When the studio decided to remaster the game, they tweaked and fixed things until the game was the enjoyable platformer that it is today.

The story of the game is very minimal, and by minimal I mean that there is no actual driving plot behind the game. You start out relaxing in your living room when a man breaks through your wall and says, "I am you from the future, there's no time to explain, follow me to..." and a giant crab arm reaches through your wall and drags your future self away. That is about as far as the story goes with this game, you are tasked with saving variations of your future self from a variety of different creatures. Some would think that this would be a negative in any game, but I found that after completing a few levels I did not care.

As you make your way through a variety of levels you will start using new guns to make your way across treacherous pits and spikes. It will take a bit of trial and error to get used to how each gun propels your character and some of them are pretty aggravating. The shotgun fires slowly, but launches your

character in a farther arc than the laser gun does. While this type of gameplay will sound simple it is actually similar in difficulty to Super Meat Boy. It will take you multiple attempts to learn how to complete certain levels and it's not because of moving enemies like Super Mario, instead the entire map is your enemy. You will find levels with the occasional enemy; however the real challenge is the spiky walls and floors that create some seriously challenging obstacles.

Luckily the best part of the game is that you don't have a limited number of lives for the level, instead you have an infinite number of tries until you reach a boss, then you have three lives to kill it. One problem I still have with the gameplay mechanics in No Time To Explain is that the laser rifle's physics don't always respond accordingly. What I mean by this is that the rifle won't always keep you in the air as long as it should.

While the game's mechanics have vastly improved since the Flash version, the graphics remain somewhat the same. The big difference comes with the ultra-smooth framerate and

well done visual effects with explosions. While some might see this as lazy or unoriginal I found that I would rather have a game that looked as good as this and ran smoothly, instead of a game that has vastly superior graphics but only runs at twenty frames.

Overall the game was definitely a lot of fun and had a good sense of humor to it. That's not

all it has going for it thought, the game is actually a lot tougher than it looks and you will find yourself sinking many an hour into this interesting platformer. With your future self yelling, "I'm sorry I ever pirated Roller Coaster Tycoon" and "How long have I been bleeding! How is this even possible!?" the game definitely has some great dialogue. ∎
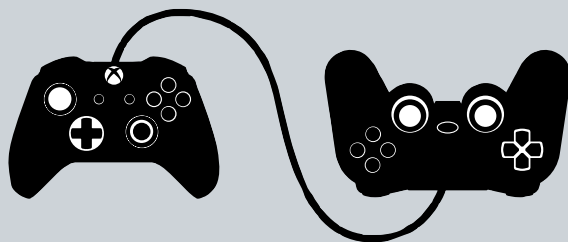
No Time To Explain Remastered
⭐ **7/10**

Risen 3: Titan Lords - Enhanced Edition Review

Publisher: Deep Silver
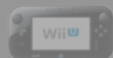**Developer:** Piranha Bytes
Genre: RPG
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One

Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Andrew Duncan

I'd like to preface this with the fact that, whereas I have Risen 2 - Dark Waters in my Steam library, I haven't gotten around to playing it yet. And I wasn't even aware there was a Risenbefore I got it.

This means I went into Risen 3: Titan Lords - Enhanced Edition with no expectations, other than what I remember from our review of the original version. Which honestly was nothing. The Enhanced Edition is basically just better graphics and added DLC. Apart from containing all updates, fixes and DLC, the graphics are now comparable to Ultra settings on the PC version.

The first thing that players will see is a ripoff of the Game of Thrones opening credits. Some epic-esque music playing over a map as parts of it are swiftly constructed. I was so surprised by how blatant it was, especially as the series itself is world-renowned, that I had to check whether the first two games did the same. Neither of them do. Don't get me wrong, it's a good idea to get the lay of the land, but be a little subtler...

As the game starts, we meet the piratey brother/sister combination, Patty and... her brother... Yes, despite both being the children of the dread pirate Steelbeard (whom I really hoped was a cyborg!), only Patty has a name. This is likely due to her being a recurring character, which I'm not sure her brother is. As the rest of the game is quite well-written and full of lore, the fact that you play a nameless bloke is kind of jarring. I'm all for immersion, but having a name doesn't nullify it.

With Patty and bro arriving at the Gold Coast after a brief tutorial inside a nightmare, I did find myself quite enjoying the graphics. You can zoom in to three levels, which helps with the somewhat awkward combat. Because of course, you're attacked shortly after arrival, and will learn too late that your secondary weapon ammunition is quite limited.

Swinging the sword is explained as being similar to Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, with combos happening to timed button presses. However, it is much more awkward than that. You can do

combos, but if you time them wrongly you will do a different swing which will open you up to being hit by the enemy. And given that the enemies like to use multiple attacks, this can quickly whittle your health down as you do pain animation after pain animation, sometimes being knocked down and so completely open to any attack. You can defend some of the hits, but occasionally there is no way of knowing which strike it will work against. You

can also roll away -- but usually this just means they turn around and hit you before you've gotten up from the roll and swung. It does help that you're allowed to take one of your seven crew members along with you, to take some of the constant heat off of you.

Outside of combat, the world is quite rich and full of life. Birds fly past, innocent monkeys scamper hither and thither, and the giant spiders are fucking frightening. Playing games for many, many years, I've seen dozens of zombies and frighteningly mutated monstrosities. Giant spiders

don't usually bother me, even when going first-person in Skyrim. However, a couple of times my mild arachnophobia ratcheted up to eleven and I wanted to run -- but then I'd have been running away from it until I ran out of stamina and had to fight it anyway. Enemies don't let you run away... I had two giant crabs, three sand devils and a giant spider all attacking me at once, at one point, because I didn't want to fight a bloody crab and ran past it...

Now I think about it, the last time I was so startled by a spider in a videogame, was

when I played Devil May Cry... Bloody lava-tarantula-demon thing... I noped that game out of my PS2 and never played another DMC.

When I first saw the world map of Risen, I was a little disappointed. There are only a handful of islands to travel to, and the sailing is done via cutscenes, so I figured it wouldn't take long to do everything. Add in the fact that, whereas The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim has every second character giving you a quest, Risen only has a few with a strong drive towards the main story, I really wasn't expecting much.

I was proven incorrect on both counts. The islands are large and detailed, with lots of people to talk to and a lot more things to kill. The quests don't come thick and fast, but when they do come it's not always 'Go fetch this' and 'Go kill that' -- though there are those kinds of quests. It's an RPG with giant spiders, of course it has 'Go kill that' quests...

However, the problem with having such large areas comes when loading them. It's always met with an autosave and a one second pause, which really messes with immersion. Much more than naming the main character, who is a set entity and completely non-customisable... But given that saving is a three-step process, it does help to have the odd auto-save -- it just could have been handled better. I've noticed it with a few enemies too, appearing in a stutter and a flash.

Whilst I'm talking about graphical issues, there is a problem with lighting. Whilst talking to someone, when the camera focusses on the other person, it can go quite dark for no apparent reason, lightening again once it pulls back out. This also happened whilst fighting and going near the shadow of a nearby mountain.

Finally, it seems unfair to mention the frame rate problems, such as going from really smooth whilst looking at the sea, to quite noticeably lagging as soon as you look at the dock next to you...

But it's not all bad, as I said before the game does look

great. I saw one texture problem, but other than that it was very nice to look at. The main character's voice actor could have been better, but the game sounds great too -- yes, even the bloody giant spiders. The four or five different types of giant spiders... The music isn't very memorable, but it suits the mood of the game well.

One thing I want to congratulate developer Piranha Bytes is the fact that there are lots of hidden details. I love to explore, and in Risen 3 it is encouraged. Literally in the case of a guide asking where you want to go. Whilst exploring a part which was out of the way, I found two skeletons with apples on their skulls, surrounded by a pile of throwing knives. No story, no quest, just an unlucky pair who decided to let their friend practice his circus act which went awry -- I assume.

Why else would they be there? I'm genuinely curious!

I'll briefly mention the 'good' vs 'bad' undertone of the game. I can't talk about it much without spoiling anything, so I apologise for vaguarity. You get to make many choices, which will affect the ending of the game. Being mean or violent will earn you a bad point, being good and nice gets you a good point. I love the way it is woven throughout

the conversations you have with people. The difference between saying "I don't fucking know" and "No idea, mate." can alter how future conversations, and the end of the game, go -- just like in real life, being mean can get you beaten up!

If you're up for a challenging action RPG to spend 30+ hours on, then Risen 3: Titan Lords - Enhanced Edition is perfect for you. It's not as long as Dragon Age: Inquisition, but the world is much fuller with quests and people to meet. Combat is challenging, but can be satisfying when you're doing it correctly. If you're a fan of the series, well done for waiting for the console release. Fans of the genre or even pirates in general will still enjoy it, despite the few bugs and challenging difficulty. ∎
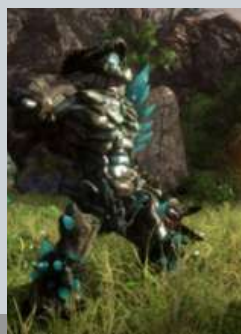
Risen 3: Titan Lords
⭐ **8/10**

**Thanks for reading!
See you next month!**